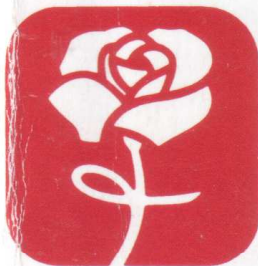


Mills & Boon



**Helen
Brooks**

The Devil You Know



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THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

Helen Brooks

When her father died, Carina Kirkton was left with nothing, she even would have to sell the house he was born to pay their debts... Then came Steed and made her an offer that she could not refuse. Steed pay its creditors in exchange for she belonged to him entirely. It was a very high price and in addition, Nina was sure he would make sure that she paid with interest.

CHAPTER ONE

'YOU'RE not hiding again, Carina! What's the matter with you? Can't you stand a little fun and excitement for just a few hours?' As her stepmother's high, strident voice cut into the book she was reading, curled up on the large window-seat behind the heavy concealing velvet curtain, Nina's heart sank still further.

'Come on!' Isobel's thin red-tipped hand pulled roughly at her arm. 'There's someone who is just dying to meet you, though goodness knows why!'

'Please, Isobel.' Nina stopped dead as her stepmother jerked her back towards the large drawing-room, where the main host of loud, objectionable revellers were screaming riotously. 'I'm not going back in there.'

'Why ever not you stupid child?' Isobel's slanted green eyes were cold. 'This whole thing is for you—you aren't sixteen every day! This party has cost us a fortune.'

'I said I didn't want it.' Nina's voice was desperate. 'I told you I didn't want any fuss, but you had to have your own way. I don't know any of these people and neither does Dad.'

'Where is your father?' Isobel's voice dripped ice.

'He's in his studio.'

'Well, you aren't escaping so easily.' Her stepmother's voice was as relentless as was her grip. 'There's a friend of your father's in there who could do us a great deal of good if you are nice to him, and you haven't even said hello yet. You're so gauche.'

'No!' As Isobel dragged her back into the main room Nina's wide violet eyes sprang immediately to the huge window at the far end. He

was still there! She tried to disentangle herself from the other woman's tight grip but Isobel's hands dug spitefully into her arms as she felt her resistance.

'For crying out loud, Carina! I'm only asking you to talk to someone for a few minutes, and then you can go to hell as far as I care.'

'All right.' All the fight fled from Nina's slight form as the party surged around them, hiding the tall dark figure in the distance from her nervous gaze. 'It's just that someone has been looking at me all night and he scares me.'

"The cat would scare you!" Her stepmother's voice was vicious as the emerald eyes swept scornfully over Nina's pale face. 'You ought to be pleased someone's noticed you.' She looked disparagingly at Nina's slim form in the loose white cotton dress she had insisted on wearing, smoothing her own tight black dress over her hips contentedly. "That dress is more suitable for a Sunday-school picnic than a party.'

They had been moving slowly through the crowd as they spoke, and the crescendo of sound was deafening. As a strong gust of whisky-laden breath from a fat balding man to one side of her hit Nina full in the face she closed her eyes briefly, fighting back the tears. These awful people! They had invaded her home, dropped cigarette ash over her father's beautiful antiques, so lovingly collected, slopped drink over all the carpets and eaten voraciously all weekend. Just one man was different, the stranger who had arrived earlier that day. He had remained cool and aloof from the rest of Isobel's friends, but he frightened her more than the rest of them together. His dark burning eyes had never left her face for a moment, and she could feel his rapier gaze slicing into her brain even when she was lost from his sight.

'Carina.' She opened her eyes again as Isobel's sharp elbow nudged her painfully in the ribs.

'Here's the party-girl, Steed,' the shrill, affected voice continued. 'I've brought her specially to meet you.'

As she raised her head and met those piercing dark eyes that had been haunting her all night her whole being jolted with scorching shock.

'At last.' His voice ran over her taut nerves like fire, deep, cool and sardonic, its timbre as hard as steel. Now she was so close to him that she was conscious of his great height and the leashed power emanating from the big, relaxed body. 'You must be Carina?'

Adolescent shyness combined with inexplicable alarm, and, as she looked up into the dark face towering above her, ripples of apprehension flooded down her spine.

'How do you do?' she answered automatically, holding out one small, slim hand, and as he took it in his own large brown one she shivered instinctively, her deep blue eyes glued to his face. He raised her hand slowly to his lips in gentle laughing salute, and as she felt his warm, firm mouth on her cool flesh she snatched it away sharply, stepping backwards, large eyes clouded with fear.

'Carina!' She had landed on Isobel's foot, and her stepmother pushed her forward again irritably, her voice shrill.

He put out a hand to steady her, and she noticed his smile had died, leaving his face still and cold, his eyes narrowed into grey slits. 'Would you like to go into the garden for a few minutes, away from all this?' His hand had encompassed the swarming crowd disdainfully and she had the impression he liked them no more than she did.

'No!' She answered more instinctively than politely, and the austere face went a shade colder at the promptness of her refusal.

'Of course she does, Steed,' Isobel cut in cloyingly, one bony finger digging Nina sharply in the back. 'She's been complaining all night about the noise and smoke, and what girl could resist making every other woman in the room wildly jealous?' Nina could imagine the flirtatious smile on the red-painted lips.

'I think Nina is old enough to answer for herself.' The soft words had carried a warning that Isobel was not slow to miss, and she took the rebuke badly, swinging round and disappearing into the screeching herd with a flick of her head.

'I'll come outside for a while,' Nina said quickly as he looked down at her again, his expression indiscernible. That poke in her back had reminded her that this was an influential friend of her father's; she couldn't offend him.

He took her hand without speaking and it took all her will-power not to pull away as he led her through the crowd that parted magically before the big, solid figure, and out through the open french doors into the darkness beyond. The cool night air was wonderfully fresh after the heavy stickiness of the house, and she breathed in its sweetness, scented with the rich perfume of roses. 'Better?' He didn't look at her as he spoke, wandering with seeming casualness away from the light and noise across the smooth green lawns, into the more dense blackness beyond.

'If I remember rightly there's a seat somewhere over here.' His voice was cool and friendly, but for the life of her she couldn't reply, and it wasn't until they were seated under one of the huge old oak trees that scattered the grounds that she ventured a glance at him in the dim shadowed light.

He caught the look and the grim mouth turned up at one corner in cynical amusement. 'You make me feel like the wolf in Red Riding Hood,' he said softly, his eyes gleaming strangely in the half-light.

'I'm sorry.' She didn't know quite how to reply, and he chuckled softly as she lowered her head so that the soft gold of her hair covered her face.

'I like that.' He touched a silken strand lightly, and she felt a trembling in the pit of her stomach as his arm rested loosely along the back of the old wooden seat close to her body.

'You're a friend of Isobel's and Dad's, then?' she said nervously, wondering how quickly she could engineer returning to the house without making it too obvious. The faint salty breeze drifting in from the sea below the cliffs that bordered the house lifted a soft tendril of hair and drew it lazily across her flushed face, and before she could lift her hand his finger had brushed it back into place, leaving a burning sensation on her cheek where it had touched her flesh.

'Your father and I share the same club in London and we often have a meal together when he is in town. I think you could say we are friends, yes,' he answered slowly. Nina noticed he didn't mention Isobel. 'He's a wonderful artist,' he continued quietly, 'you must be very proud of him.'

'Oh, I am.' She turned warm, enthusiastic eyes up to his impulsively, thrilled as usual by any mention of her father's talent. 'Did you go to his latest exhibition?'

'No, I was abroad on business at the time.' His cool voice held a thread of laughter that she felt was directed at her, although not in an unkind way. 'You enjoyed it?'

'It was wonderful.' He was making her feel naive and very childish, and she didn't like it. Her voice quivered into silence and he looked at her consideringly.

'You're very young for sixteen.'

'Not really.' She was annoyed at the overt criticism in the gently mocking voice.

'No?' His voice was soft and thick, sending a flicker of fear across her face. 'Have you ever been kissed?'

'What?' She stared at his face in the darkness, and his teeth gleamed white as he smiled easily, noting her confusion.

'Has a boy ever kissed you?' The trembling in her stomach increased to a slow churning, and she gulped deep in her throat as the slumberous eyes fastened on her mouth. 'Sweet sixteen and never been kissed.' He laughed softly deep in his throat. 'We can't have that, can we?'

Before she was aware of what was happening he had moved closer to her side, lifting her slightly with experienced ease and pulling her into his arms so she was half lying across his lap, imprisoned by his hard body.

'So innocent and pure.' The words were a whisper against her face as she stared, mesmerised, into the burning eyes. 'Is it for real, or are you just a figment of my imagination?' His clean breath was warm against her skin, and the smell of his aftershave was sending goose-pimples all over her body. She felt frightened and excited at the same time, but his gentleness was reassuring and she relaxed slightly as he kissed her forehead with warm, firm lips.

"This is madness.' His voice was husky as he lowered his mouth to hers, but the kiss was incredibly sweet and her lips quivered softly beneath his as he tangled his fingers in the soft silk of her hair. 'Like honey...' The words were a groan against her mouth, and suddenly the tempo of the kiss changed, his lips becoming more demanding as they opened hers with slight force. He pulled her closer to him so she was moulded into his body as the blood began to pound in her ears.

The intimacy of the darkness was like a warm veil, hiding them from the rest of the world, and she began to tremble helplessly as he swept her face with hard burning kisses, returning again to her half-open lips and plundering the warm interior of her mouth greedily. She was lost in a whirlwind of shattering sensation; his touch was triggering a response that she was quite unable to hide. She raised her hands shyly to the dark, crisp hair at the base of his neck, and as he felt her fingers, warm on his skin, he groaned in his throat, his body hardening in answer to her response.

As she felt his body stirring against hers the fear she had first felt began to overshadow the bewildering excitement his kiss had aroused. 'No.' She struggled slightly against his broad chest, but her voice was lost against the fierce pounding of his heart and her cry went unheard. His hands stroked down her body caressingly, touching the budding curves through the soft fabric of her dress, and, thoroughly frightened now, she jerked violently in his arms, her head colliding with his in a sharp crack as she struggled to sit up. 'Don't!'

There was no mistaking the panic in her voice, and this time Steed heard it as he raised his head in surprised enquiry. 'Steady; that hurt.' His voice was full of laughter, but she edged away from him swiftly, her breath coming in shaky little sobs.

'I'm going back to the house.' She rose so quickly that she almost fell, and as his hand went out to save her she shrank from his touch.

'That's a good little girl.' His piercing eyes swept over her teasingly, but she flinched as she sensed the mockery in his deep voice. 'Back to your party.'

She turned to leave, but as she did so he picked a small glittering object from his suit jacket and handed it to her with a dry little bow. 'Yours, I take it.' She took the earring with hands that shook, feeling

the laughter he was trying to keep in check, a red tide of humiliation staining her pale cheeks.

'Thank you.' Her voice was low.

'My pleasure. All my pleasure?' The last three words were a question, and as she looked at him his big body began to shake with laughter. She started to run back to the house, but as she did so his laughter followed her, ringing in her ears, pounding in her brain, until the whole world seemed full of taunting, cruel hilarity and she felt more alone than she had ever felt before in her whole life.

'It's time, Carina. Everyone's here.' Isobel's smooth, cold voice couldn't quite hide the excitement that was turning her face red under the heavy powder.

Nina turned from her bedroom window, where the harsh icy rain was beating an insistent tattoo against the glass. She was glad it was raining. Since her father's sudden death from a massive heart attack five days before, the weather, at least, had been in sympathy with her, the small funeral that day a muddy nightmare.

'Steed's here.' Isobel's voice was callously eager. 'He's just flown in from Germany and didn't know the funeral was today. I wonder why Tom made him executor of the will?'

Nina shuddered in spite of the central heating. Why had her gentle, unworldly father entrusted his wishes to that man, of all people? She couldn't believe it. He had known how she hated Steed, although not the reason for it.

In a flash her mind had winged back five years to that fateful birthday party, and her soft lips pulled into a straight line as she

remembered the torment she had felt then. She had hidden in her room the rest of the evening and all the next day, ignoring Isobel's furious rantings and not leaving her sanctuary until she was sure all the guests had left. A note had been slipped under her door as she had heard the visitors leaving, but after opening it and seeing Steed's bold scrawling signature at the bottom of the page she had ripped it up unread, dropping the pieces as though they had burnt her. It had taken her a long time to come to terms with the fact that she must forget the incident, but with it had come a semblance of peace.

When she had heard her father had invited him down for the weekend some months later she had rim like a terror-stricken animal before its hunter, spending the weekend with friends, and only returning after she had telephoned to make sure the coast was clear. She had confided in her father after that, telling him of her dislike of his friend and asking him not to invite him to the house again. He had been perturbed and upset by what he had considered her unreasonable and inexplicable hatred, but had agreed immediately. He loved her too much to do anything to hurt her.

'Don't stand there dreaming today, of all days.' Isobel's hard voice cut into the memories like a sword- thrust. 'You get more like your father every day.'

Nina stared at her, her huge violet eyes blind with grief. 'How my father ever came to marry a woman like you I will never know,' she said in a low, throbbing voice, a look of disgust sweeping over her white face.

'Don't look at me like that,' Isobel screeched, her green cat's eyes narrowing furiously. 'It was no picnic being married to that miserable old fool, I can assure you. I might have got a few pounds from this marriage to live the way I wanted to in the last few years, but that's all I did get from it. It was "Nina, Nina, Nina", from the day I walked in this place. The pair of you made me sick.'

'You've bled my father dry from the first day you met him.' Nina's voice was raw with misery. 'He loved you in the beginning, but you only wanted his money, didn't you? Nothing could satisfy you.'

'He certainly couldn't, that's for sure.' Isobel's grating voice stopped suddenly as Nina's hand smacked her face with a loud crack.

'Don't you ever talk about him like that again,' Nina whispered shakily as Isobel lifted one be-ringed hand to her scarlet cheek in horror. 'He's dead now and you can't hurt him any more. There's no reason for me to have to listen to you now, and I won't. You'll get what you ask for.'

'You'll pay for that!' Isobel was shaking with rage. 'You might still think you're lady of the manor, but you are in for a shock, my girl. You can't stay at home with Daddy painting your pretty little pictures any more now, can you? It's a big, bad world out there, and they eat little girls like you for breakfast. Now, are you coming to hear this will read or shall I tell than you feel too consumed with grief?' Her lip curled on the last words and she looked remarkably like an old painting of a medieval witch, no vestige of beauty left in the cruel painted face.

'I'm coming.' Nina's voice was weary as the fight drained out of her. What did it all matter now anyway? Her beloved father was dead, but at least she still had Grayfields, the home they had both loved so much.

All she had to do was to get through the next hour or so and then they would leave her in peace. She knew her father would have left the beautiful, rambling old house to her. It had been in their family for generations, succeeding families having added their own touch to its splendour, an annexe here and a complete wing there, until it roamed across the grounds in untidy picturesque beauty.

The tall man standing immobile in the dimly lit hall, dark in the stormy afternoon, watched her expressionlessly as she slowly descended the winding staircase in front of Isobel. He noted her immediate recoil as she caught sight of him in the shadows, and the harsh mouth tightened fractionally as she recovered herself in an instant, her smooth skin turning a shade paler and then flushing as Isobel brushed past her, arms open wide.

'Steed, darling, what are you out here for? You'll freeze to death. You know how awful these old houses are.' She turned to Nina, her eyes poisonous. 'I think you met Carina before. At her sixteenth party, wasn't it?' The middle-aged face was as hard as iron, malicious satisfaction in every feature. Isobel was no fool and she had always wondered exactly what had transpired that night, drawing her own conclusions eventually, which weren't too far removed from the truth.

'Good afternoon, Mr Charlton,' Nina said coldly but with a slight quiver in her voice she couldn't quite control, forcing herself to look up into the dark face staring down at her unsmilingly. The dark grey eyes flicked over her briefly, taking in the long high-necked dress of soft mauve material that highlighted the unusual hue of her thickly lashed eyes but protectively covered all her smooth honey-coloured skin from probing eyes, and the long silky hair that gleamed like molten gold in the artificial light.

'I was very sorry to hear about your father, Carina, I know how close you were. It must have been a great shock.' The deep, cruel voice she remembered was warm with sympathy, the formal words coloured with genuine concern. Surprised at the difference, she blinked her fear away, and as she stared deep into the shadowed face watching her so carefully she saw with relief that he wasn't the black devil her imagination had painted over the years. His grey eyes were gentle, as though he understood her pain, and the handsome, austere face held no mockery in its depths.

'My friends call me Nina,' she said stiffly, dropping her eyes shyly with a quick glance at Isobel's grim face. Her stepmother had refused to call her anything but Carina, using her name as a subtle insult most of the time.

'Then I hope you will allow me to call you Nina,' he replied slowly, his velvet voice lingering over her name. As before, the timbre of his voice sent tiny shivers down her spine, and she flushed in confusion, feeling suddenly-threatened. As though sensing her agitation and the reason for it, he turned away abruptly towards the drawing-room, where the sweet smell of burning pine logs flavoured the air. 'Everyone is waiting,' he said expressionlessly over his shoulder. 'I wondered if something was wrong.'

Besides Mr Atkinson, their solicitor, there was only Steed, Isobel and two distant old aunties in the room as she entered. As the solicitor's dry formal voice began to read slowly she felt her mind beginning to wander, her eyes drawn against her will to the big dark man listening so intently across the other side of the room. He still had a strange effect on her emotions. The hard profile could have been etched in granite and he was undeniably handsome, but there was something more, a compelling magnetism that both attracted and repelled her. His expensive clothes were worn with casual nonchalance, sitting comfortably on the powerful body, and even when he was sitting perfectly still, as now, there was a commanding force generating from the big frame, a live energy that was undeniably sensual.

The cool, penetrating gaze suddenly veered towards her and she flushed involuntarily, lowering her eyes swiftly and longing to return to the safety of her room. She wished all this were finished.

'Nina?' Mr Atkinson's dry voice suddenly pierced her thoughts, and she looked at him with wide, startled eyes. 'Do you understand what I've just been saying?'

'Yes,' she answered dully. She didn't, but what did it matter?

'Now, although your father left Grayfields to you, there is a severe complication.' She looked at him in surprise and glanced across to where Isobel was sitting, rigid with fury.

'Didn't he leave anything for me?' Her stepmother's voice was burning with hate. 'I'll contest it all; I'm not having this; he can't -'

'Please, Mrs Kirkton.' The solicitor's voice was weary. 'Wait until I've finished.'

Isobel sank back down in her seat with an expression of venomous anger twisting her face. 'You're not getting it all, my girl,' she spat at Nina, her eyes blazing.

'I'm afraid, Mrs Kirkton, that nobody is getting anything.' Mr Atkinson was obviously losing patience. 'It would seem that Mr Kirkton was put to a lot of expense in the last ten years.' Nina glanced swiftly at her stepmother, and Isobel flicked her head defiantly. 'Totally against my advice he mortgaged and remortgaged Grayfields to pay mounting debts, which were still never fully covered.'

'What do you mean?' Nina whispered as the bent old man looked at her sorrowfully.

"There's nothing, child.' He was obviously finding this very difficult. 'To satisfy your creditors you are going to have to sell Grayfields for whatever you can get for it, and quickly, but even then I doubt if all the debts can be met.'

'You knew!' Isobel had risen slowly like a wild, demented goblin, her hands clawing the air like talons. 'You must have known!' Her voice

was rising slowly as she approached Nina's chair. 'He told you everything.'

'We never discussed finances,' Nina replied stiffly, heartsore and shocked beyond measure at Isobel's reaction.

Steed was by her side in an instant as Isobel lifted her hand to strike, grasping the thin wrist tightly and jerking the crouched figure round to face him with vicious force. Nina had shrunk deep into her chair at Isobel's approach; the ageing face had been positively fiendish, but the raging fury in Steed's face quelled even Isobel's madness.

'Touch her and I'll kill you.' His voice was deadly. 'I want you out of this house and out of her life as soon as you can pack.'

'You're crazy,' Isobel whispered, glancing to the assembled company for support, but they all sat, stunned, in their seats, the two old aunties looking as though they were going to collapse any moment.

'You killed Tom just as surely as if you'd put a gun to his head and fired the trigger.' His voice was relentless. 'You took everything, and when that was all used up you made him part with Grayfields to satisfy your flamboyant lifestyle and constant greed. You broke him, Isobel; you turned him into a caricature of the man he once was. You used the fact that he was one of life's natural gentlemen to full advantage, didn't you? Didn't you?' He shook her slightly, his lips curling back from his strong white teeth in a contemptuous snarl.

'Well, no more! It's all gone. You've had your pound of flesh, and if I ever see your face in these parts again I won't be responsible for my actions. I mean it, Isobel.' As he let go of her wrists she backed towards the door, her face ashen. 'Get out and stay out.' His voice was savage, and Isobel made no attempt to reply, her green eyes glassy with shock and her face white under the heavy rouge and powder.

As the door closed behind her stepmother's stumbling form Nina shook with tremors she couldn't control, one thought only burning in her brain. She had lost Grayfields; there was nothing. Oh, Dad, she asked silently into the empty void stretching out before her, why didn't you tell me? But she knew the answer even as the question formed in her mind. Her father had had the ability to shut unpleasant things out of his consciousness most of the time, ruthlessly blocking their intrusion into his inner sanctuary. She remembered finding him once, hunched over his easel, his face torn with worry and anguish, but at her approach it was as though a veil had come down over his emotions, and within seconds he'd been his old self again, chatting to her easily while they had painted.

Now Grayfields would have to be sold and strangers would own the old mellow stone and gaze out of the leaded windows at a wild, furious sea on a stormy winter's afternoon. She couldn't bear it.

She looked around the room dazedly, her tormented eyes drinking in the familiar objects, the heavy antique furniture her own mother had lovingly collected, the thick Persian carpet covering the floor, and the glittering old chandelier overhead. She pictured the grounds outside, the well-kept lawns surrounding the house and the unruly wilderness near the cliffs where the rabbits played uninterrupted on balmy summer evenings.

'Help me, somebody.' The words were a whispered plea, so faint that they were like a sigh leaving her bloodless lips.

'Nina.' She became aware that Steed was kneeling at her side and the room was empty.

'They've gone?' Her voice was tiny, like a child's.

'Yes, they've all gone. Mr Atkinson is taking the aunts home.' His voice was indescribably tender. 'Drink this.' He formed her nerveless fingers round a balloon glass half full of brandy.

'I don't drink.'

'You do today.' His voice was authoritative and she obeyed him without thinking, choking and spluttering on the first mouthful as the hot, burning liquid fired her throat.

'It's disgusting!'

He smiled wryly as he watched her silently, his eyes tight on her face. 'One more mouthful.' She grimaced and swallowed again. She had to admit that the brandy was steadying her nerves.

'Did you know?' She looked him full in the face and he straightened from her side, moving across to the chair opposite and sitting down with a heavy sigh.

'Not exactly.' His voice was sad. 'I'd got a good idea and I'd tried to question Tom once or twice, but he wouldn't discuss it. He knew I would have helped him and he was a proud man.'

'I know.' Her eyes filled with tears. 'I still love him, you know, in spite of all this.'

'Of course you do.' He smiled gently. 'He's your father.' She was so glad he hadn't said 'was'.

'What shall I do?' Strangely it didn't seem wrong to be asking him for advice, and she suddenly had the feeling that that was why her father had made Steed his executor, to help her in the first aftermath. 'I know Dad would have wanted to pay everyone he owes, but what shall I do if there's not enough when Grayfields is sold?' She gulped

on the last words and her voice was high with pain. 'How long do people wait?'

He looked at her for a long moment without replying. Outside a harsh wind had blown up, whistling over the vast cliffs, its whining voice melancholy and haunting as it rattled the old windows and caused Nina to shiver deep in her soul. 'Steed?' Her voice was a question mark; there was something burning deep in his eyes she didn't understand.

Still he didn't speak, and Nina suddenly had the feeling that he was troubled, deeply troubled, but that was ridiculous. She brushed the thought aside swiftly. Her problems were of no real concern to him—they had only met once, when all was said and done.

He spoke at last, his voice deep and mellow in the quiet of the room. 'There is a way you can keep Grayfields and pay off the debts.'

She looked at him in amazement. 'Don't play games with me, Steed.' Her voice was infinitely weary. 'I might not be much of a businesswoman, but even I know that is impossible.' Her voice cracked slightly as she spoke, and he winced as though her pain was his pain.

'There is a way, but I don't know if you could bring yourself to take it.' His face was curiously tight and the dark slate eyes burnt into her wide blue ones.

'I'll do anything.' Her voice was eager. 'Tell me.'

'You could marry me.' The words hung in the air, stark and brittle, and for a moment Nina thought she had misheard him.

'What?' She stared at him blankly.

'I said you could marry me, become my wife and live here.' Their eyes clashed, hers naked with undisguised horror, and his coldly challenging.

'You're mad,' she breathed as a distant rushing in her ears began to grow into a dark flood and a faint feeling of nausea gripped her stomach.

'I've never been more sane in my life.' As she stared at him his eyes became black pools that were drawing her inwards, and just before she lost consciousness she was aware of a bitter tormented anguish twisting the dark face into a devil's mask.

CHAPTER TWO

NINA came round to find herself lying on the sofa which had been drawn close to the bright red flames of the crackling fire, a light blanket covering her body. Steed was crouching by her side, his dark face unreadable and his big body tense and still.

'I'm sorry.' He spoke as she gazed at him blankly for a second, trying to remember where she was. As realisation rushed in on her she struggled to sit up, but he pushed her down firmly and he stood up slowly, his eyes cold. 'I shouldn't have sprung it on you like that after what you've been through today. It was stupid.'

'Was it a joke?' Her voice was hopeful and he smiled ironically, his eyes mocking.

'No, it wasn't a joke.' He sat down at the end of the sofa and she moved her feet quickly into a corner, fearing any contact with his warm flesh. If he noticed the gesture he made no comment, his stony face implacable.

'In my youth, when I imagined my first proposal to a woman, I always had the vision of her falling into my arms.' His voice was wry. 'You certainly fell, all right, but not quite in the way I had imagined.'

She looked at him doubtfully, unable to gauge his mood. Steed gazed across at her, a tiny muscle working in his jaw. 'That was my way of telling you I have never honoured another woman by asking her to change her name to mine,' he said slowly, self-mockery dripping from his words.

'Oh.' The word was flat and that was how she felt, as though all this were unreal and she would wake up soon and everything would be normal again.

'You sure aren't making this any easier.' He moved restlessly, standing up in one fluid movement and pausing to look down into the fire, his back towards her and his strong arms resting on the ornate mantelpiece.

'I know this probably seems a nightmare to you, but will you just try and forget all that has gone before and listen to me a minute while I explain a few things to you?' He turned as he spoke, and she saw with surprise that although his face was cold with pride there was a strange pleading in the grey eyes that he couldn't quite hide.

'Yes, I'll listen,' she said quietly, her eyes wide with curiosity and apprehension.

'Three years ago my brother and his wife were killed in a boating accident and I became the guardian of their two boys.' Nina looked at him, perplexed. What had all this got to do with her situation?

'Unfortunately my lifestyle is not conducive to children,' he continued drily, 'but the twins were happy, well-adjusted boys and they were already settled at an excellent boarding-school when the tragedy occurred. I saw no reason to change what they were accustomed to, and they have continued at the same school for the last few years, holidaying with me when my business commitments have allowed it, which has been less frequently than I would have liked.' He ran his hand through his crisp dark hair abruptly, his face harsh.

'Due to some sort of virus infection, Jason has been ill recently; it affected his blood quite badly, but that has all been regulated now. Unfortunately the illness has left him both weak and depressed, and what affects one twin affects the other. They are very close, you see.' His face softened, and Nina nodded sympathetically, her eyes glued to his.

'The specialist has been quite specific about what Jason needs now: no more medicines and drugs, but a settled family life and a long, easy convalescence, possibly a private tutor for some months, but certainly as little pressure as possible. They are eleven years old and have been at boarding-school since they were six.' He sighed deeply. 'It won't be easy to integrate them into a normal home, and virtually impossible for me, living alone. I have a flat in London, an apartment in America and two villas abroad, but absolutely nowhere I can take two young children and feel confident they are in the right environment.'

He paused, his grey eyes searching her small face intently. 'Until now, that is. I would like to buy Grayfields, Nina, and make it their home.'

She looked at him in bewilderment. 'I still don't see how that concerns me...'

He held up his hand, checking her voice abruptly, his dark face impassive. 'I would be prepared to buy Grayfields at a price which will enable you to clear all your financial burdens and leave you with a totally clean slate if you would live here and oversee the twins' well-being for the immediate future. Furthermore, I would make you an allowance of several hundred pounds a month, with a written contract promising a lumpsum at the end of that time which will make you financially independent for the rest of your life.'

She stared at him, mesmerised by the expressionless voice. 'Your part of the arrangement would be to provide the constant stability that has been missing in my nephews' life so far, a warm family background that they can learn to feel secure in.'

'But I don't have to marry you for that,' she murmured in a dazed voice, her head reeling.

'Yes, you do.' His voice was grim. 'I'm not talking about a few months, Nina. If I buy Grayfields you stay here with me for the next seven years until the boys are eighteen. At that time you would be free to terminate all commitments, and Grayfields would be made over to you to do with what you would.'

'Seven years?' She stared at him, fear and dread leaping out of her eyes.

'You will still be a young woman at the end of that time,' he said coldly. 'Twenty-eight, by my calculations. You will own Grayfields lock, stock and barrel, and be extremely wealthy into the bargain. Not something to be dismissed without careful consideration.'

'Can't I just promise to stay here and work for you?' Her voice was desperate. 'I wouldn't -'

'Not good enough.' There was no mercy in the frosty face. 'You need my money, I need your services. I've met many women in my life, Nina, but there is no one I would rather trust my nephews to than you. If you agree to my conditions I know you will fulfil than to the best of your ability. What the twins need is a normal, natural companion, someone who is unworldly and innocent.' That strange expression she had caught once before flickered across his face, swiftly gone, and his harsh features softened as his eyes noted her white face and clenched hands. Her heart stood still as he took one small fist and gently smoothed out the long fingers in the palm of his hand.

'If you chose to remain purely housekeeper and mother-figure to the twins within the marriage I would accept that.' His eyes were tight on her face. 'I wouldn't particularly like it, but I would accept it.'

Her face burnt with hot colour and she lowered her eyes swiftly.

He stretched out his long muscular legs towards the fire, still holding on to her hand that quivered slightly in his grasp like a small trapped bird.

'You're frightened of me; why?' The question was gentle, and she looked at him in confusion.

'This is all so sudden,' she said weakly, her voice dying away as he shook his black head slowly.

'It's nothing to do with that. I have a vivid memory of a beautiful young girl in a pure white dress with fresh flowers wound through her hair. She stood out from the other...' he paused sardonically '...ladies present like a dove among ravens. I spoilt her birthday.'

Nina looked at him sharply, her face crimson. 'Please, that was a long time ago; I don't want to discuss it.'

He nodded, seeing the withdrawal in her huge violet eyes. 'OK, Nina, subject closed. It was just that I'd hoped you might have mellowed a little towards me during the last few years.' He smiled wearily. 'It doesn't matter anyway; I'm a big boy now.'

He looked at her as she lay huddled at the end of the sofa, pale cheeks turned pink by the heat of the fire and her gleaming hair spread out beneath her shoulders like a silky pillow. 'I've taken the liberty of calling you Nina and I'm not sure if you consider I have the right. Can we try and be friends?'

She nodded slowly. 'Yes, of course.'

'And you'll think about my proposition?' She nodded again. 'I meant what I said about the more... personal side of the arrangement.' His mouth twisted slightly. 'I've never understood the need for human sacrifices.'

Her breath caught in her throat as she looked back at the handsome austere face watching her so closely. He was so near that she could smell the delicious tang of expensive aftershave, and even when he was relaxed, as now, the muscled power of his big male body was faintly threatening and strangely exciting.

'Steed, I don't think this could work -' she began suddenly, but he stopped her, putting a finger to her lips.

'Don't decide now. It's something you must consider very carefully. I'm leaving for Germany in the morning for five days on business. On my return I will expect a decision, and whatever you decide I shall treat it as irrevocable.' He looked at her thoughtfully. 'Think hard before you refuse my offer; you have nothing to lose and everything to gain.'

'But you, what do you gain? It doesn't seem fair.' Her voice was earnest, and he looked at her searchingly for a long moment before shaking his head slowly in amused incredulity. 'I don't know if there is another woman on this earth who would be concerned for my welfare in these circumstances,' he said ruefully. 'I know what I am doing, Nina. Things are clearer to me today than they have been in a long, long time.'

Nina gazed at his face, so near to her own, puzzled and troubled. He was talking in riddles again.

He moved along the sofa until he was bending over her slightly and put out a gentle hand to her hair as though driven by some inner compulsion, talking as if to himself. 'So silky and soft, like sunlight playing on clear water.' He ran the gleaming gold through his fingers slowly, his hand continuing down the nape of her smooth neck, his touch sending electric ripples down her spine.

She forced herself not to flinch, although her senses were screaming as his hand caressed her throat quietly. His fingers burnt her skin and he cupped her small chin in his hand suddenly, looking deep into her dark blue eyes. She could see the tiny white laughter-lines winging away from his eyes, and noticed a few strands of silver in his thick blade hair.

'I've never seen true violet eyes before,' he murmured thickly, and as his narrowed gaze dropped to her mouth she jerked away abruptly, totally panic-stricken.

He sat perfectly still for a full minute and then stood up, moving over to the fire and warming his hands in front of the glowing embers. Her pulses slowly stopped racing and she took a few deep, calming breaths as he kept his broad back to her, beginning to feel ridiculously foolish. He must think I've got the personality of a frightened rabbit, she thought miserably as the long seconds ticked away in the silent room.

'I'll be here at eight on Wednesday evening,' he said blandly at last without turning his head. "Try and get plenty of sleep and eat sensibly in the meantime; it's easy to neglect your health at a time like this.'

She nodded to his back. 'Yes, all right.'

'Do you need any cash?'

'What?' The question took her completely by surprise.

'I said, do you need any cash?' he said patiently, turning to face her, his face cool and closed.

'No! No, thank you.' She answered instinctively, wanting him to go, and he walked across to the door slowly, making no move to touch her.

'I will see Isobel before I leave.' His voice turned into ice. 'I shall expect her to be gone by the time I return on Wednesday. Have you a friend you can ask to stay with you?'

'Yes; yes, I have,' she answered quickly, although no one sprang to mind. She didn't want anyone anyway; she needed to be alone for a time.

'Goodbye, Nina, till Wednesday.' The door shut firmly, and for a crazy moment she had the impulse to call him back, to ask him to stay. He had the ability to turn her emotions upside-down and round about in a matter of seconds, and she had never felt so confused in all her life.

Isobel left early the next morning, her vitriolic hatred spilling over as she waited in the large hall for the taxi to arrive. 'Goodbye, Isobel.' Nina had held out her hand in farewell but the older woman turned on her like a demented virago.

'Don't you "goodbye, Isobel" me, Miss Pure and Innocent.' The painted mouth had fairly spat the words in Nina's white face. 'Going to marry him, are you, then?' The green eyes narrowed into feline slits. 'Oh, yes, he told me.' She nodded as Nina stared at her, horrified. 'I've got to remove my contaminating presence from his dear bride-to-be. How you managed to pull that off I shall never know—half the women I know have been after him for years.' The thin lips pulled back from her mouth in a bitter sneer. 'They say the quiet ones are the worst, and all the time I thought you were so chaste and untouched.'

Her voice was rising shrilly with each word, and as she screamed out the last sentence the doorbell announcing the arrival of the taxi cut into her anger. She gave Nina one last look of pure venom and then she was gone, the taxi speeding her away to who knew where.

Nina stood leaning against the solid wood of the front door and let out a sigh of enormous relief as her legs began to stop shaking. She was gone. She hadn't realised how the other woman's presence had oppressed her for years.

The little daily had come as usual, clucking like a fat mother hen on finding Nina all alone in the great house. She was owed three months' wages, which constituted a small fortune to the middle-aged Cornishwoman, but she had never even mentioned the fact to Nina before the reading of the will and didn't do so now. 'You can't clean this big house by yourself, my pet,' she admonished Nina firmly. 'Your dear father would never forgive me if I didn't keep an eye on you, especially now that one has gone.' It occurred to Nina that in all the time she had known Mrs Finch she had never heard her refer to Isobel by her name. She kissed the small woman's plump poppy-red cheek gratefully, warmed by her friendship.

The morning of the fifth day dawned grey and misty, an intermittent icy drizzle coating the bleak landscape in a wet shroud. Nina spent a miserable few hours wandering along the cold seashore, the swirling fog turning the coastline into a hazy grey and the small rock-pools into slippery traps. She returned home at lunchtime, soaked to the skin, her stomach a mass of knots as she contemplated the evening ahead.

By mid-afternoon a bitingly cold wind had risen, scattering the swirling fingers of mist and creating a melancholy whispering down the chimney that made Nina shiver. 'Looks as though we're in for a storm,' Mrs Finch said cheerfully, looking up into the leaden sky as she left in the early afternoon's dim light. 'It's cold enough for snow and I thought we'd had it all for this year. I don't like leaving you

here by yourself, Miss Nina. Why don't you come home with me for the night?'

'It's OK,' Nina said quietly, squeezing the work-worn hand gently. 'I'm expecting a visitor this evening.'

The little woman nodded, reassured, and disappeared down the long drive where the bare branches of the great trees were bending and creaking in the gathering force of the gale.

By teatime the first fat snowflakes had begun to fall from a dark windy sky, blown in great gusts against the old window-panes. Far from abating, the storm was gathering strength with each passing hour, and Nina found herself peering anxiously into the swirling blackness as she prepared dinner for two in the large warm kitchen.

The lights were flickering ominously now and again, causing her heart to rise into her mouth, and she kept glancing nervously around, hearing strange unfamiliar sounds as the great house steeled itself for the onslaught. 'Don't be so stupid,' she admonished herself firmly as she pushed the roast lamb into the oven with shaking hands. 'Keep busy.'

Leaving the meat to cook slowly, she sped upstairs, showered and slipped into a loose wool dress in a soft grey, applying the same colour to her eyelids with a light touch of mascara on her thick dark lashes. Her flawless skin needed no cream or powder, and after brushing her hair into a high loose knot on the top of her head she gave a cursory glance in the mirror before returning to check the food.

By nine p.m. she was convinced Steed wasn't coming. A heritable blizzard was raging outside and already great drifts of gleaming snow were piling up against the house, reaching halfway up the huge studded front door.

At ten-thirty p.m. she threw what was left of the charred meat into the bin with the dried-up vegetables and sat down with a weary plop at the kitchen table, bursting into angry, disappointed tears. 'Why didn't you get here, Steed?' she asked the empty room irrationally. Until this moment she hadn't realised how much she had counted on his coming; subconsciously she had accepted his offer the minute he had made it, the logical part of her brain recognising a means of escape from impossible circumstances.

It's just the storm that's prevented him tonight, she told herself firmly, but another part of her mind was asking why he hadn't phoned to let her know he couldn't make it, and she began to feel terribly afraid that he had changed his mind. He had very little to gain from the arrangement, after all—a large, rambling old house he was paying nearly double for, a wife who would not be a wife, and an inexperienced companion for his wards whose salary was exorbitant. For the first time the generosity of his offer really hit home.

When the lights went out Nina knew real, stomach- wrenching fear. 'Come back on; please, please come back on,' she begged out loud into the blackness as slow terror numbed her limbs and her blood sang in her ears. She was incapable of moving from the safety of the kitchen where at least some light from the pure white landscape outside was reflected through the large picture window. Her father had once explained that her inordinate fear of the dark had begun on the night her mother had died, but that was of no comfort now. She felt her flesh begin to crawl and reached for the bottle of wine she had bought specially for this evening. It might give her some sort of courage to get through what was going to be a very long night.

After the first two glasses the darkness didn't seem so bad; in fact, the dim light cast a pleasant glow over the familiar objects in the room. Nina had never liked the taste of alcohol, preferring soft drinks normally, but by the third glass she was wondering why she had never tried it before. The rich, mellow red wine was warming the

empty place in her stomach where the spoiled dinner should have been, and she was just thinking she might face the dark, draughty hall after all when a light scratching sound caused her to freeze.

She stared fixedly at the closed kitchen door, and as a muffled bump shook the silence her heart began to pound. As she pulled herself to her feet she was surprised to find her head swimming alarmingly and she nearly fell, but as the dizziness passed she listened intently, relaxing slightly as the only sound she heard was the whining of the wind through the nooks and crannies of the old building.

'It's all right,' she told herself shakily, 'it's only the storm.' For some reason she couldn't seem to get the words past her tongue and a slight feeling of nausea gripped her stomach, but as a distinct creak from the hall rent the silence she stumbled across to the old dresser and fumbled in the drawer for the carving knife, its steel blade bright and sharp. Armed with the vicious-looking knife, she crept over to the door, shrinking against the wall in terrified dread as it slowly began to open.

She remembered reading in a martial-arts journal of her father's that a savage yell as one attacked demoralised the opponent, so as the door swung to one side she gave a blood-curdling shriek and lunged forward at the same time with the rapier-sharp blade.

The tall, dark figure in the doorway leapt two feet in the air, the knife missing his broad chest by a hair's breadth. Swearing fluently, Steed wrenched the weapon from her suddenly nerveless fingers, pulling her back into the kitchen and pushing her limp body down on to a chair. 'What the hell do you think you're playing at?' he snarled, his face contorted in the faint light.

She shook her blonde head helplessly, golden strands falling down about her chalk-white face. 'I'm sorry, I...' Her voice broke and tears

flooded down her face, her soft mouth quivering with relief and bewilderment.

Steed gave a muttered exclamation, bending down and drawing her up into his arms, cradling her shaking body against his hard chest. 'You little idiot,' he whispered against the shine of her hair, 'what on earth were you trying to do?'

'Frighten off a burglar,' she sniffed, her sobs subsiding against the rough tweed of his coat, feeling immensely comforted by the big masculine body as a sudden hiccup caught in her throat.

'You did an excellent job,' he replied wryly. 'Who needs a Dobermann if they've got you?' She looked up at him nervously. He was looking down at her with a small smile pulling at the side of his mouth, his eyes tender.

'I think it must have been the wine,' she stammered feebly, slowly becoming aware of his strong arms holding her close and that familiar delicious smell of aftershave on the brown skin. 'I thought you weren't coming, and the lights all went off...' Her voice trailed away as her aching head began to swim again.

He set her back down in the seat abruptly, glancing at the practically empty bottle with narrowed eyes. 'I think a stiff black coffee is in order,' he said drily, 'I know I could do with one.'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' said Nina shakily, trying to gather her wits. 'I'll see to it. You've been out in this awful weather and -'

'Please, just do us both a favour and sit still.' The words were final and she sank back thankfully, her legs peculiarly weak. 'You're going to feel great in the morning.' It didn't sound as if he expected a reply and she couldn't think of one anyway.

'Did Isobel vacate the premises?' His voice was cool as he poured hot water into two porcelain mugs.

'Yes, she went the next day.'

'Who did you get to stay with you, then? Couldn't you have woken them tonight if you were nervous?'

She looked at him warily, taking the mug he offered and sipping the hot liquid gratefully before she replied. He wasn't going to like this and she was suddenly apprehensive of his reaction.

'There's not anyone here.' Her voice faltered as the full glare of the dark eyes was directed straight at her.

'Why not?' His voice was tight.

'I couldn't think of anyone to ask and I wanted some time to think anyway. I'm perfectly all right here and -'

'You don't mean to tell me that you have been living here alone for the last few days?' He shook his black head in disgust. 'You stupid girl. Don't you ever read the newspapers? I could spank you.'

She stared at him, eyes wide with fear as she realised he was furiously angry, his face cold with smouldering rage. 'I specifically told you to contact someone, anyone, and arrange for them to stay. If it comes to that, you could have had one of those aunts round. Anyone is better than no one.' He took a big gulp of hot coffee, holding his hands round the cup. 'Don't you ever disobey me again, Nina. You are allowed one mistake, but only one.' She glanced at him under her eyelashes to see if he was joking, but was disconcerted to see he was deadly serious.

'Look, I'm not a child...' Her protest died as he moved a pace towards her.

'Then stop acting like one. I don't give orders unless they are absolutely necessary, but when I do I expect them to be obeyed— instantly! Do you understand me?' She nodded sulkily. All this fuss!

'You are far too young to be living alone in an isolated house in the middle of nowhere. The village is a good ten minutes' walk away. I know -' his voice was wry '—I've just walked it.' Nina looked at him enquiringly. 'All the roads are blocked for miles. I've left the car in a lay-by somewhere; they'll have to dig it out in the morning.'

He shrugged his coat off wearily, white lines of exhaustion carved deep in his face. 'I seem to be wet through. Is there an old dressing-gown or something I could wear?'

'Of course.' Nina felt guilty she hadn't noticed the state his clothes were in. Her dress felt damp from being pressed against his coat, and she saw now that he was shaking with cold, his face grey and tired.

'We'll have to feel our way upstairs,' she warned as, reeling slightly from the effects of the wine, she led the way to one of the guest bedrooms which had its own *en suite*. The alien blackness didn't seem so unfriendly now Steed was there to share it, although, on her leaving the room after gesturing to the bathrobe and pyjamas she had laid on the bed, tiny prickles of fear trickled down her spine, causing the hairs on the back of her neck to rise. Halfway down the stairs she lost her nerve and sped back up the curving steps, her head thick and muzzy and her legs trembling.

She could hear Steed splashing about in the bathroom when she gingerly peered in the semi-dark room, the brilliance outside causing an eerie glow, familiar objects taking on weird connotations.

'I'm going to wait for you out here,' she called shyly, opening the bathroom door a fraction and dropping the dry clothes through. 'I'll get us both a snack when you've finished.'

The splashing stopped and his deep voice murmured something in reply, but her head was aching painfully and her eyelids were too heavy to hold open any longer. She lay down on the soft bed, dragging the thick, warm quilt round her until she was enmeshed in a cosy cocoon and dropping instantly into a deep sleep.

'Nina, Nina.' She was dragged up from layers of dreamless sleep by someone whispering her name, and became conscious of a warm hand restlessly shaking her back and forth. 'Come on, wake up, woman! How many glasses of that damn stuff did you drink anyway?'

'Don't. Leave me alone.' Her sleepy voice was muffled in the bedclothes and she felt herself being rolled out of the warmth into the stark chill of the night air.

'Come on, Nina, show me your room and then you can get to bed properly and sleep it off.'

As the words sank into her dazed mind she gave a protesting little moan and tried to sit up, but the dizziness swamped her again and she fell back on to the bed with a little giggle. 'I feel funny.'

Steed muttered something under his breath and lifted her into a sitting position, one arm supporting her back as he knelt by the side of the bed. 'Listen to me. I'm going to take you to your room and then you can go to sleep. Which is your room, Nina? Are you listening to me?'

She opened heavy eyes to find his dark face inches away from her own. 'Don't want to go to my room,' she muttered defiantly. 'I want to stay with you.'

'For crying out loud!' He tried to haul her to her feet, but she moved sharply and caught him off balance, causing him to fall beside her on the wide bed.

'Please.' She caught hold of the towelling robe with both hands. 'I don't like the dark. I don't want to be by myself.' She moved closer to him as she spoke, and he stiffened, his deep voice a low growl.

'You don't know what you're asking.'

'Please, Steed.' She rolled to face him in the velvet darkness, her small hands still clutching the front of his robe tightly, bringing her face into line with his. As though in spite of himself, he moved one large hand into the soft fragrance of her tangled hair, coiling the silky strands round his long fingers, while the other pressed into her back, straining her closer to his long shape.

She watched his face breathlessly with clouded eyes, her limbs relaxed and lethargic. His brown skin smelt fresh and soapy-clean from the bath, and with a tingling shock she realised he wasn't wearing the pyjamas as her wandering fingers tangled in the small curling tendrils of hair covering his broad chest. He groaned deep in his throat at her touch and his voice was thick. 'Stop it, Nina. Stop it now, before it's too late.'

She heard him as if in a dream, his low words barely registering in her languorous stupor. 'Please, Steed,' she whispered imploringly, 'don't make me go.'

As his warm lips found her soft mouth she felt small tremors of pleasure begin to shudder down her body, the kiss growing more demanding as he felt her reaction.

Her hands moved involuntarily across the bare chest and his arms tightened, drawing her softness against his hard muscular thighs. He

explored her mouth intimately, his scorching lips moving down to kiss the pulse throbbing wildly in her throat.

'Nina.' Her name was a groan on his lips and as his hands slid over the warm rounded curves of her trembling body she moved against him, her heart pounding so hard that she thought it would burst. She felt small ripples in the hard limbs pressed so close to hers and with a small shock of excitement realised he couldn't hide his need of her, his body hardening against hers as he drew her still closer into his rigid shape.

As she felt his hand on the zip of her dress she wriggled against him, her voice a little lost sound in the depths of the bed. 'Steed?'

He suddenly froze, and then his arms pushed her away in quick rejection as he swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat, silently hunched, holding his head in shaking hands.

'Steed?' As she repeated his name he gave a muttered exclamation and moved violently away, his movements stiff and angry, striding across the room and flinging open the wide leaded windows so the icy air flooded in, dispelling any warmth with its cold breath. He stood there for some minutes, starry snowflakes settling on his dark head and shoulders and drifting on to the carpeted floor, before he turned at last to face her.

She had buried deep under the covers again and lay, sick with hot humiliation, horrified at her lack of control. How could she have behaved like that? She writhed under the quilt in twisting mortification, her head swimming and a small lost sob escaping her lips.

'Don't cry.' His voice cracked. 'I'm sorry; it was my fault. Forget about it.' Embarrassment made her dumb as he continued, 'It won't happen again. You have my word on that.' She closed her eyes, sick

at heart. It hadn't been his fault; she had to admit the blame was well and truly at her door. The alcohol had anaesthetised her senses until she hadn't had any control over what she was doing. Thank goodness he had stopped.

His voice was stronger as he came over to where she lay, curled into a tight little heap under the quilt. He smoothed back the hair from her hot, wet face, his lean outline in the short robe silhouetted against the grey light. The enormity of what had nearly happened washed over her in a burning wave and she sat up suddenly, pulling the covers tightly round her.

'It's all right, Nina; no harm done.' It was as though he could read her mind.

'I don't know what came over me,' she whispered huskily. 'I've never done anything like that before in my life.'

'Do you think I don't know that?' he said roughly, reaching out to take her hand in a gesture of comfort. She flinched sharply away before she could stop herself, her flushed face tensing as he drove one fist tightly into the palm of his other hand in bitter self-anger.

'Get some rest now.' He stood up and looked down at her, his mouth a tight white line. 'I'll find a few blankets and sleep in the chair.'

'No, I'll go -'

He interrupted her viciously, his tone brutal. 'You are frightened to be alone. There is one bed. I will sleep in the chair. Now, for the sake of my sanity, damn well shut your eyes and go to sleep.'

She said no more, snuggling down under the covers like a scared child, feeling the warmth begin to relax her stiff limbs as he closed the window and prepared a makeshift bed on the big easy chair in the

corner of the room. Within minutes she was asleep, her breathing even and regular, but the big figure in the chair sat for hours with his piercing eyes on the small curled body under the mound of covers in the middle of the bed, his. cold face a harsh, unreadable mask of pain.

CHAPTER THREE

NINA awoke early next morning as the deep blackness grew paler and dawn crept stealthily into the room, the birds in the silver birch just beyond the bedroom window singing their welcome to the pale still world outside. A shaft of weak sunlight fell on to her upturned face and she stretched sleepily to find herself entwined in the quilt, her eyes snapping open as the events of the previous night rushed in on her with sickening clarity.

She glanced across the room to the far corner, where Steed was swathed in blankets like an Egyptian mummy, sitting dumped awkwardly, fast asleep in the chair, the heap of blankets making him appear curiously vulnerable. The austere grim features were softened in slumber, and already his face was dark with stubble.

She felt a small pang in her heart region as she looked at him. How could she face him after last night? He could have taken her then and he knew it, and yet he had pulled back before things had gone too far. Why? Her smooth brow wrinkled. She had only had two other boyfriends since that first encounter with Steed at sixteen, two fresh-faced lads from the village who had both driven her mad with their constant desire to kiss and touch her. Neither had lasted beyond a month, and she had never met anyone who remotely stirred her blood, except... She looked again at the silent figure in the chair. What was it about him? Just seeing his face caused her breath to catch in her throat.

She hated him. The silent voice in her head was determined. He had used her and hurt her all those years ago, mocking her innocence and making scars that had taken a long time to heal.

She carefully climbed out of the bed and crept over to the door cautiously; she desperately needed to have a shower and wash her hair before she spoke to him again. She needed to feel in control.

"That smells absolutely delicious." Steed's voice was warm with approval, causing her to jump away from the kitchen window, where she had been gazing into the white fairyland outside that the tiny snowflakes had created, while the rashers of bacon spluttered merrily under the grill and three large eggs cooked in the frying-pan. 'You aren't just a pretty face, then?'

Nina flushed nervously, aware he was teasing her but uncertain of how to respond to this big, intimate stranger. 'I love cooking,' she said quietly. 'I've done most of the meals here since I was about ten. Isobel hated it so I just carried on after she came.' She didn't raise her eyes to his, keeping them fixed on the view just outside the window, where the stately trees were clothed in pure bridal splendour, their branches illuminated against the pearly grey sky.

'It hasn't been easy for you, has it?' Steed remarked gently as he seated himself at the kitchen table. Even in her father's old pyjamas and dressing-gown, and with his face unshaven, he was still the most devastating man she had ever seen.

'I'm fine. Dad was wonderful to me and I didn't really need anyone else,' Nina said quickly, her tone defensive. 'He enabled me to do what I really wanted most of the time, which is to paint. The housekeeping just fitted in.'

Steed looked at her consideringly. 'I know how Tom felt about you, Nina. He thought he was acting for the best, keeping you from the big, bad world out there. He knew I thought he had overdone the protective-father bit, so I'm not telling you anything I haven't told him in the past.'

She flushed miserably. Isobel's cruel gibes over the years had made her super-sensitive to any criticism of her father, however oblique.

'I liked things the way they were,' she repeated stubbornly.

'Sure, you did.' His voice was conciliatory. 'Nevertheless, you never had anything else to compare it to except this tiny corner of the world.'

His brooding presence seemed to fill the room as she served him breakfast, his dark face making her all fingers and thumbs. Sitting down opposite him with her own plate, she became excruciatingly aware of the intimacy of the moment, her throat constricting until she was unable to eat, simply moving the food around on her plate, hoping he wouldn't notice.

'I'm not going to jump on you.' His voice was grim, all tenderness gone, and as she glanced up sharply she met his taciturn gaze, his grey eyes stormy.

'I'm just not hungry,' she lied unsteadily, and he smiled mockingly, standing up and moving to the door.

'You're a poor liar, Nina, unlike most of the other women I know.' His face was tight. 'We've got a few things to sort out this morning, so while I get dressed you can make us another pot of coffee, and for crying out loud try and relax.' He glanced at her white face. 'You're making this whole thing a lot harder for both of us.'

She reflected on his words as she deftly cleared away the breakfast dishes and put the coffee on to percolate, her actions mechanical. She had to admit Steed was right. Her nerves felt like jangled wires, stretched so tight that they could snap at any moment. 'It's understandable,' she said to the bright-eyed robin who had come for his usual breakfast crusts from the kitchen window. 'Dad dying like that and the shock of all the debts... what does he expect?' And yet she knew it was more than that. Her whole being seemed to be waiting for something, but what, she didn't know.

She badly needed some time in her father's studio, where she could lose herself in her work. The big untidy room at the top of the house had been a haven in the past from which to escape Isobel's sharp tongue, its magnificent full-length windows giving a panoramic view over the smooth lawns and wild unkempt garden beyond, stretching down to the cliff's edge and the beautiful Cornish coastline in the distance.

'Coffee ready?' The firm male footsteps on the polished wooden floor of the hall had made her stomach turn over, and as she turned to face Steed, who was standing in the doorway, she felt suddenly light-headed, whether from emotion or lack of food she wasn't sure.

His face was still dark with unshaven stubble but glowing from a vigorous wash, his curling black hair damp from the shower. He was casually dressed in a thick Aran jumper and dark trousers, the latter stained at the bottom with a tide-mark of damp. 'Oh, I'm sorry.' Nina flushed. 'I should have dried your clothes properly, or found you some of Dad's.'

'I don't think Tom's clothes would fit me,' he said in his deep voice, and as Nina's eyes swept down the powerful muscled body she flushed still deeper, remembering how his hardness had felt against her soft flesh.

'I'd appreciate the use of a razor, though,' he continued, touching his chin thoughtfully. 'I grow a beard overnight but I didn't like to touch your father's personal possessions without permission.'

Nina nodded, amazed at his sensitivity. It didn't fit in with her memories. Some of her surprise must have shown in her face because he moved swiftly to where she stood like a sleek jungle cat, placing his hands on her slim shoulders, his face dark with anger.

'OK, let's have it, Nina. You seem to think I'm some sort of monster. Has Isobel been telling stories about me? Is that it?'

She shook her head defensively, her face troubled. 'No. I don't know anything about you—that's half the trouble.' What the other half was even she couldn't define.

He nodded slowly, his taut face relaxing and the grey eyes losing their chill. 'Yes, I can accept that. Well, we've got some catching up to do, it would seem, but before that I want to know the answer to the proposition I put to you the last time I was here. Have you reached a decision?'

Now the fateful moment was here it seemed remarkably simple. 'Yes,' she said calmly, her large liquid eyes fixed on his tense face, feeling an enormous sense of relief and a sudden instinctive assurance that her answer was the only one possible. She knew beyond doubt it would have been what her father had wanted.

His face was cold, his expression blank as though he was holding himself in check with iron resolve. 'Yes, you have reached a decision, or yes, you have agreed to my suggestion?' he asked smoothly.

'Yes, I would like to marry you,' she replied softly, intimidated by his coolness, and as his face remained a remote mask she added politely, 'Thank you for asking me.'

For a swift transient moment the mask slipped and something gleamed in the heavy-lidded eyes that frightened her, a burning raw hunger that was all-encompassing, but then it was gone so quickly that, she told herself afterwards, she must have imagined it. He seemed quite unaffected by her reply after all, moving away immediately to stand staring out of the window at the frozen still world outside for long minutes before turning slowly and casually reaching for his coffee-cup, still quite silent.

'So,' he said tersely when the silence was beginning to scream, 'it's up to me now to make sure you don't regret your decision. We will take it from here.'

As Nina padded along the soft white sands towards the small secluded cove she had found the previous day the fierce Spanish sun beat down, its brilliance reflected in a myriad dancing tiny waves that rolled gently on to the sun-baked shore. Stooping to pick up a particularly large and beautiful shell that lay in her path, its luminous mother-of-pearl interior gleaming in the light, she reflected for the tenth time that day on Steed's generosity and the power of his wealth that had placed her in this enchanted corner of the world.

Events had happened with breathtaking swiftness from the moment she had accepted his offer. His private helicopter had landed in the grounds that same day, and within hours Nina was installed in an elegantly furnished suite at a wildly expensive hotel in the heart of London. The deep, thick white carpet, dusky pink silk lamps and ornate furniture had taken her breath away as she nervously entered the penthouse accompanied by Steed and the manager of the hotel, who was almost falling over himself in his efforts to please. 'It meets with your approval?' Steed's voice was suave and unimpressed.

'It's lovely.' With a tremendous effort she made her voice firm and unemotional, and a spark of approval flared briefly in the hard grey eyes watching her every move.

'My flat is just round the corner and I eat most of my meals in the excellent restaurant downstairs. It would be convenient for you to stay here while the arrangements are completed, but if it is not to your liking...?'

'It's fine.' She just wanted to be left alone. The speed and efficiency with which Steed was controlling her life had left her weak and trembling, with a faint sense of rebellion beginning to stir deep inside. He remained coldly distant all day, his face steely whenever he had met her troubled gaze as though he was already regretting his amazing proposition.

The next few days consisted of numerous shopping trips. Steed insisted on a complete new wardrobe and even a gruelling session with a top beautician, who crisply assured her that a short bob was just what madam's hair needed. She asserted herself more vigorously than tactfully at this point, leaving the beautician mortally offended and Steed shaking with silent laughter all the way back to the hotel, where he gravely informed her he wouldn't have let her hair be cut anyway.

'What do you mean, *you* wouldn't let it be cut?' Her small chin stuck out angrily. 'I decide how I want my hair. You might be buying all these clothes and things, but you aren't buying me.' The words hung in the air, stark and ugly, and she turned away rebelliously, suddenly sick at heart.

He strolled over slowly to where she stood, a strange expression in the steel-grey eyes, and gently turned her to face him. 'If I want your hair left long it will be left long—make no mistake about that.' His voice was splinter-cold. 'You have entered into this agreement entirely of your own volition, and until such time as it is completed you will consider my opinion in every small thing that affects you, as I will do with you. It's a two- way thing. Do you understand me, Nina? I don't want to have to repeat myself.'

She stared up into the handsome, menacing face, her hair turned into spun gold in the bright artificial light, her violet eyes shadowed with anger and exhaustion, and nodded wearily.

That night over dinner in the quiet candle-lit restaurant he silently slipped a heavy antique ring on to the third finger of her left hand, his touch sending needle- sharp tremors up her arm. The ring felt too heavy for her small hand and as she gazed in wonderment at the intricate design, heavily encrusted with tiny rubies, pearls and diamonds, he briefly explained it was a family heirloom. 'But it's too valuable,' she protested, her eyes wide with shock and the growing realisation that she was really committed to this volatile, bewildering man. 'You've done so much for me already, I can't wear this. I don't need a ring -'

He interrupted her violently, his voice biting as he read the panic in her eyes. 'To all intents and purposes, you will be my wife shortly. It will be expected that you wear the Charlton ring, and wear it you will. Most women would jump at the chance to flaunt such a trophy.'

'I'm not most women.'

'That you certainly aren't, my little sleeping beauty. Who is going to be the prince who wakes you, I wonder? Whoever he is, he's going to have a long wait for the next seven years.' His voice was savage.

'W-what have I done?' she asked unsteadily, feeling time in his company was like walking blind through a minefield.

He muttered something under his breath, his dark face bitter. 'You haven't done anything,' he said at last, taking a deep breath and running a hand distractedly through his crisp hair. 'I'm not renowned for my patience, and it's been wearing thin over the last few years.'

'I don't understand.'

'Maybe it's just as well you don't,' he replied grimly, changing the subject and letting the moment pass.

Later that evening as they shared a pot of coffee in the quietness of her suite Steed talked of his family and business interests, the two intrinsically linked through the chain of shops first his grandfather and then his father had opened. As he described the extent of his empire Nina felt herself grow cold. She had had no idea he was so wealthy or moved in such exalted circles as he was portraying. How was she going to cope with all this?

She rubbed trembling fingers across her pale face and, seeing her distress, he caught her hands in his own, his hard face tender. 'Don't worry. It will all work out. You won't meet anyone until I feel you can handle it.'

'I don't know if you can wait that long.' She tried a wobbly smile, tears of exhaustion and fear held at bay by sheer will-power.

'I can wait.' The smile had gone and his face was deadly serious. 'I've had a lot of practice.' He was talking in riddles again, but somehow it didn't matter, as time seemed to stop and the room took on an expectant stillness. She gazed uneasily into the hard-boned face inches from her own, and when the kiss came it was gentle and light, his arms protecting rather than possessive. Her soft lips quivered under his and warm pleasure invaded her tired body as the kiss deepened, his mouth more intent, parting her lips and sending shivers of delight trembling down her spine.

'So fresh and beautiful.' His voice was a murmur against her soft skin and she sighed fleetingly, her eyes closed, wanting the moment to go on forever, feeling wonderfully comforted and safe. His hands wandered caressingly over her back, drawing her gently closer into his hard body until she could feel every inch of him against the softness of her shape.

'This is driving me mad...' His voice was such a deep whisper that she couldn't quite catch what he had muttered into the hollow of her

throat, but he straightened suddenly, moving her carefully away, stroking her hair lightly as he did so.

'You're exhausted. I've worn you out with all the excursions over the last few days.' His voice was rueful.

'I'm fine.' She raised dazed eyes to his, aware she hadn't wanted the embrace to finish, amazed at the security and peace she had felt in his arms.

'You're more tired than you know. I've been a fool to press you so hard on top of all the emotional upheaval of the last few weeks. Get some rest now, and we'll have to think about a short break in the sun before you meet the twins.'

After he had left she undressed and climbed into bed, asleep the moment her head touched the pillow, unaware that it was the first night thoughts of her father and her old life hadn't pulled at her heartstrings in the last moments before sleep.

The shrill persistence of the telephone awoke her late the next morning and as she padded swiftly into the lounge area she noticed with surprise that it was snowing heavily outside, tiny patterned stars crystallising the huge glass window that looked out on to half of London.

'Miss Kirkton?' The cool, superior voice of Steed's private secretary flowed down the line, well-modulated and expressionless. Nina had met her briefly on the day she had arrived in London when Carol had brought some important papers to the hotel for Steed to sign, and had felt immediately intimidated by the other woman's cold, immaculate blonde beauty. She had been the epitome of the well-dressed, cool businesswoman, beautifully turned out and perfectly in control.

'Mr Charlton asked me to call you this morning. He would have spoken to you himself but he was called away to Germany urgently in the early hours. A project he has been handling for some time has developed a few teething troubles.' The clear voice was smooth and bland, but Nina sensed, as she had done when they had met, that the secretary didn't like her much, that she resented her sudden arrival in Steed's life.

'He has asked me to arrange for you to be flown to his villa in Spain this afternoon. A taxi will call for you at three p.m. to take you to the airport with your tickets, Spanish currency and other information, and you will be met at the other end by one of Mr Charlton's employees, a man called Lopaz.' The voice was slightly tighter as she continued, 'Mr Chariton will telephone you at the villa tonight, and hopes to join you direct from Germany in a few days.'

By nightfall that same day she was transported into a different world...

The white heat began to penetrate the enormous straw hat Nina had pulled on as protection against the sun's powerful rays, and she straightened up slowly, dropping the large conical shell into the striped beach-bag slung across her shoulder. Shading her eyes with one hand, she gazed along the deserted stretch of pale white sand, the sapphire-blue sea and brilliantly clear sky like a picture postcard, beautifully unreal.

Once established in the tiny cove cut into the cliff face, she spread out the huge, thick beach-towel and methodically stroked sun-cream on to every inch of visible flesh, determined to make the most of the unusual heat wave that had started the day after her arrival. The heat was bouncing off the warm rocks behind her and creating a perfect sun-trap.

'This is the life,' she muttered lazily to herself, the attraction of basking in warm sunshine after the snow and storms she had left behind in England too good to resist. It was just a minute's walk from Steed's villa down a winding cliff path to the vast empty beach below.

Yawning sleepily, Nina rolled languidly over on to her stomach, shutting her eyes, her wandering mind reviewing the events of the last few days. She had been met at the busy airport by Lopaz as arranged, and he had explained on the ride back to the villa that he and his wife Maria kept house for Steed, his wife taking care of the housekeeping and cooking, while he was employed as gardener and odd-job man. 'Is very good,' he said smilingly, showing all the gaps in his discoloured teeth. 'The *senor*, he treat us like his family. Is very good.'

After leaving the noisy, hot confines of the terminal the low powerful car that Lopaz drove with such childish pride ate up the miles in quiet luxury. They passed tiny, sun-baked villages and small bustling towns, carefully tended olive groves and sprawling orchards, and then Lopaz turned into the slumbering hills where only the occasional large house, shuttered behind great stone walls and leafy trees, could be glimpsed.

Dusk fell as they finally drove up the short drive to the villa, and Nina's first glimpse of the house was masked by the velvet scented darkness. She was aware of thick stone walls, whitewashed in the inevitable Spanish tradition, and wide latticed windows surrounded by foliage, but was too mentally and physically tired to do more than pay lip-service to the delicious meal Maria had waiting, falling into the wide, soft bed that was waiting for her with her mind a mass of confused vivid images and colours.

The next day the full beauty of this occasional home of Steed's overwhelmed her with its natural grace. 'You come and see it all,'

Maria encouraged after she had finished serving breakfast. 'I show you everything.'

She realised she had subconsciously been expecting a brash modern villa, but the huge old house set in a slight hollow in the hills was at least a hundred years old, surrounded by tall whispering pines that trailed their way right down the cliff path a hundred yards away on to the magnificent silky white sands of the deserted beach.

The interior was in keeping with the wonderful timelessness of the place. Marble floors covered with soft hand-woven rugs, ornate and delicate furniture with deep buttoned silken upholstery and white walls covered with exquisite paintings of such variety that Nina was awestruck. 'The *senor*, he like to have beautiful things,' Maria said proudly as she saw Nina's wide eyes. 'He collect the paintings for many years now.' With a sudden jolt of shock Nina saw one of her father's pictures in a prominent alcove, then another, then another. A sketch here, a portrait there—she recognised more of her father's work as she wandered from room to room, her eyes filling with tears as she realised Steed had valued her father highly.

The scents of summer permeated the high sunlit rooms; besides the terracotta pots holding a profusion of sweet-smelling flowers, Nina noticed intricately carved wooden bowls placed strategically in small nooks and crannies, their contents of dried flowers and herbs expelling a rich perfume into the warm air.

'This is all so lovely, Maria,' she breathed to the little plump woman who was red with pride, obviously delighted by Nina's enthusiasm.

'You know Senor Steed was born here? That this is his first home?'

'No, I didn't,' Nina replied in amazement, and Maria went on to explain that Steed's Spanish mother and American father had been visiting her parents on holiday when his mother had unexpectedly

gone into labour, producing Steed in one of the bedrooms upstairs. Nina listened, spellbound, as the small woman rambled on, her wandering tongue giving Nina a rare insight into the complicated character of the new master of Grayfields...

'Well, and what juicy morsel do we have here?' The light, mocking male voice brought Nina abruptly out of the semi-doze she had fallen into and she sat up sharply, momentarily disorientated. Her blonde head collided with that of the tall, lean man kneeling at her side, and he collapsed on the hot sand, rubbing his nose ruefully.

'Steed said you knocked 'em for six, but I didn't realise he meant literally.'

'You know Steed?' She observed the young man warily, her head ringing where it had hit his. He was incredibly handsome, his fair straight hair cut long and sleek into his neck, and the blue eyes that were holding her own in an amused inspection were a deep dark azure, their brilliance breathtaking.

'I'm James.' As her expression remained blank he grimaced slightly. 'James, Steed's cousin. Don't tell me my big cousin hasn't told you all about wicked old me?'

'I don't think he's mentioned you,' Nina said uncertainly, not wishing to offend this smiling stranger.

He threw back his smooth blond head and laughed, his tanned skin reflecting the golden glare of the sun. 'Oh, you'd remember if he'd mentioned me. I'm what's known as the black sheep in the estimable Charlton family.' His full mouth curved into a hard smile. 'I prefer to spend money rather than make it.'

'There's nothing wrong with that as long as it's your own money you're spending,' Nina said drily as their blue eyes met and held. His glance narrowed and his eyes swept over her slim form again with growing respect.

'I wondered what the female would be like who finally managed to bag old Steed. You haven't disappointed me.'

'I can rest content, then.' Her voice was mildly sarcastic.

He laughed again but without taking his vivid blue eyes from her face. 'Or did *he* bag *you*, I wonder? What makes me think you just might be different from all the rest?'

'I've no idea.' Nina felt hot anger permeating her body, and turned from his mocking gaze to pull on the cotton top she had discarded earlier. The insolent blue gaze had seemed to undress her.

'I've upset you.' His voice was faintly apologetic. At twenty-two, James Kent was hopelessly spoilt, used to unquestioning devotion from a succession of eager young women attracted as much by his easy wealth as the unusual good looks. Not particularly bright, he found it simpler to enjoy life with an ever-ready stream of companions than to make any effort to work. His doting mother idolised his every action, and his father had long since washed his hands of his wayward son, concentrating on James's older brother to take over the family business that Steed's father had helped to launch before his death. It suited James admirably; he expected little of life beyond amusement and adulation.

'Yes, you have upset me, as it happens.' Nina looked him straight in the eye, her face straight. 'I'm not used to your particular brand of rudeness.'

He straightened up, his mouth falling open in amazement, incredulity written all over the classical features. He clearly wasn't used to plain talking, especially from the opposite sex.

'I think I've been severely reprimanded.' His voice held a note of childish surprise. 'I apologise if I've spoken out of turn.'

'Forget it.'

'No.' He caught hold of her arm with his hand as she turned away, her face aloof. 'I meant it. I really am sorry if I hurt your feelings. My tongue runs away with me at times; it doesn't mean anything.'

Her heart-shaped face lit up in a warm smile, causing the man sitting by her side to catch his breath suddenly. 'Shall we start again, then? I'm Nina.' She stretched out her hand.

'How do you do, Nina? I'm James.' He gravely shook the small hand, surveying her through his thick golden lashes, his expression indiscernible.

The next day Nina awoke with a strange sense of expectancy and lay for a moment in the wide, soft bed, trying to marshall her thoughts. She had enjoyed James's company yesterday during the remainder of the day, and it had been pleasant to have someone to share the evening meal with instead of sitting in remote splendour at the huge polished dining table. He was an amusing companion, his easy charm and quick wit causing the hours to fly by, and he had seemed boyishly determined to remain in her good graces. And yet... She paused in her reflections. There was something... something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

He had begged to take her sightseeing today, and she stretched lazily under the pale silk covers, the shadowed room already warm in the morning light. Bright rays of sunlight slanted in through the wooden

shutters, dancing over her sleepy face and causing her to bury her head in the deep scented pillows.

She didn't hear the soft knock at the door and started violently as a warm, hard hand touched her shoulder. 'Nina? I've brought you a cup of tea. We were going to make an early start, remember?'

James looked down at the slim shape partially hidden under the thin covers, his eyes licking over her body swiftly as she pulled the sheet up to her chin.

'James, get out.' Her voice was tight and her eyes were blazing. 'This is my bedroom, for goodness' sake. Maria brings me a cup of tea in the mornings, as you well know. What will she think?'

'Does it matter?' His eyes were narrowed.

'Yes, it does. I'll be downstairs in a few minutes. Please, James.' He didn't move, his face stubborn.

'If you don't get out in thirty seconds flat you can forget the sightseeing.' Her voice was as cold as ice and he seemed to realise at last that she meant what she said. He left the room reluctantly, and as soon as the heavy oak door closed behind him Nina flew across and pushed the stiff old bolt into place. Perhaps this sightseeing trip wasn't such a good idea after all, she mused under the shower as the warm water washed the last traces of weariness from her golden-brown limbs. She hadn't missed the predatory gleam in his eyes as his glance had swept over her. Still, it must be all right. Steed had allowed him to come here, knowing she was alone. He must have known he could trust his cousin?

She still felt faintly uneasy as she dressed quickly in a thin blue cotton sundress, the deep hue of the material turning her eyes into dark pools. It seemed strange that Steed had encouraged James to

entertain her in his absence, but James had been adamant last night. 'Steed's coming later in the week, as you know,' he had smiled cheerfully at dinner. 'He says we can use the Mercedes so I can show you a bit of the real Spain. It'll be a nice day out.'

He was waiting for her as she came downstairs, a picnic hamper already prepared by a frowning Maria, which James went to load in the car.

'Is anything wrong, Maria?' Nina asked as the small woman merely nodded a cool reply to her 'good morning' and made to disappear into the kitchen at the back of the house.

'Is not right, *senorita*. Is not right.'

'What isn't right?' Nina could feel the agitation coming off the little woman in waves; her plump red cheeks were fairly quivering with indignation.

'For you to go out with Senor James like this. Senor Steed, he would not like it. His cousin is a... a plaything, I think it is?'

'A playboy.' Nina's voice was flat.

'*Si, si*, a playboy. He does not have the respect in his heart that makes him a suitable escort for you.'

'But, Maria,' Nina said gently, 'Steed knows that James is here. If he were at all concerned he would come himself, wouldn't he? I'm sure it's all right. We are just going for a day's sightseeing, and we'll be back well before dark.'

'I wouldn't bank on that.' James's voice sounded from the open doorway. 'I was thinking of rounding off with dinner at a nice little place I know down by the waterfront at Lambardia.'

'We'll be back before dark,' Nina repeated firmly, throwing him a warning glance. He really was strikingly handsome as he stood nonchalantly, framed in the arched doorway, his smooth blond head turned into a white halo in the sun's light and his dark blue eyes insolent as he glared at Maria. How much of their conversation he had heard, Nina wasn't sure.

They prepared to leave immediately after a light breakfast. The sun was a white ball in the clear blue sky and already it was warm enough to sunbathe, Nina thought longingly. The scent of pine trees mingled with the sweet heavy perfume of the dog roses entwined on the old stone wall which formed part of the garages at the back of the house, and as Nina waited for James to bring the car out she breathed in the rich warm air appreciatively, her eyes closed and head uplifted to the glare of the sun.

'You look like one of the vestal virgins with your eyes closed and your hair hanging down your back like that,' James remarked as he drew up by her side, the dark blue Mercedes purring gently, 'It's incredibly erotic.'

'Really?' She folded herself gracefully into the plush leather seat, her voice coldly dismissive.

'Are you, then, or has Steed already claimed the prize?'

'What?' She had lost the thread of the conversation and glanced enquiringly at his eager face, the vivid blue eyes bright and sharp and his tongue licking his lower lip.

'Are you a virgin?' He gestured insultingly.

'Right, James, that is it!' She unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the car door in one movement, furiously angry. 'I don't know what sort of company you are used to keeping and I care even less, but I am not

used to this sort of conversation and I won't tolerate what I don't have to.' She glared at him through the open window, slamming the door with unnecessary force. 'You are a total pain.'

She marched back into the house, crossly ignoring his angry voice calling her name. How dared he? Jumped- up little upstart! Just because he was used to every female he met falling at his feet—well, he left her stone-cold! She stopped abruptly in the doorway, amazed at her train of thought crystallised by her fury. She really did find him totally unattractive; he was so different from his cousin.

Steed's image swam before her eyes and she felt suddenly hungry for his presence, the dark, cold face and big masculine body vivid in bar imagination. What was the matter with her? Her cheeks burnt with hot colour. She didn't even like him, did she? It was a business arrangement they were entering into. He needed the house as a secure base for his wards, and she needed financial solvency. He. wasn't even interested in her as a wife. James had intimated last night several times that Steed had had many women friends, preferring uncomplicated relationships, with no animosity on either side when they burnt themselves out. No doubt countless women found him irresistible—he would be able to take his pick. 'Stop it, Nina.' She spoke out loud, her thoughts racing.

The harsh screech of burning tyres brought her back to the present as James flashed past her in the Mercedes, driving far too fast down the short tree-lined drive. She caught a glimpse of his face, dark with anger, and then he was gone in a swirl of red dust and blue metal.

Her father would have disliked that young man intensely. Her eyes shadowed with grief as she walked back into the house, pausing in the wide square hall as Maria caught hold of her arm excitedly. She had been rattling away in rapid Spanish on the telephone and now passed the receiver over to Nina with a delighted expression on her perspiring face.

'Is Senor Steed.'

'Hello, Nina?' To her surprise she felt her legs shaking as the familiar deep, rich voice came down the line.

'Hello, Steed; I nearly missed you.' Her voice sounded squeaky.

'So I gather.' His voice was cool and guarded. 'I understand James is there with you?'

'Well, you knew that already, didn't you?' Nina replied. 'He said he's spoken to you.'

'He did speak to me.' The tone was dry in the extreme. 'As far as I was aware, we had arranged to meet up together at the weekend and travel down then. He knew I'd got delayed here. He was going to spend the weekend with us and then meet some friends next week.'

'Oh.' Nina's voice was small. Maria had been right.

'Maria tells me you are going out for the day.'

'Not exactly.' Now Nina's voice was guarded. She had the distinct impression Steed was holding his temper at bay with some considerable effort.

'What do you mean, not exactly? Are you going out for the day with my cousin or not?'

'Not.'

'Look, Nina,' his voice was getting frostier and more irritated by the moment, 'this is one hell of an expensive phone call, I'm in the middle of a million-pound takeover that has developed a headache, and I haven't got time to play games. What's going on? Let me speak to James—perhaps he'll make sense.'

'You can't.'

The silence at the other end of the phone was deafening. 'He's not here,' Nina rushed on. 'We had a slight disagreement and he's gone off in the car.'

'My car?' This was getting worse every second. She said nothing.

'What did you argue about?'

'We didn't exactly argue.'

'Nina!' The word was a pistol shot and she nearly dropped the telephone in fright, glancing in helpless appeal at Maria, who was standing to one side of the hall, her brown face troubled.

'He just made a remark I didn't like, that's all. It didn't mean anything.' Her voice was shaking.

'Which was?' His voice brooked no dissent.

'He asked me if I was a virgin.' There was fluent and volatile swearing, and then she heard him apologising to someone in the background, his voice muted.

'Nina?' His voice was sharp. 'When my cousin returns from his jaunt in *my* car—which, incidentally, he is not insured for—you will ask him to leave immediately. Do you understand me?'

'I can't, Steed.' Her voice was weak. 'This is not my home and he's your cousin. I can't -'

'Nina!' Her name was barked down the line and echoed in her ear. 'I'm not suggesting that you do it, I'm telling you! You order him to go.'

'I can't.' Her voice was flat. 'How can I -?'

'Put Maria on.'

Nina handed the telephone to Maria, who took it gingerly, as though it were going to bite her. Although their conversation was conducted in Maria's native tongue, it didn't need a genius to interpret Steed's instructions to his housekeeper, whose round face became more and more upset. By the time the call was finished both women felt weak at the knees and Maria was nearly crying, her plump cheeks wobbling with agitation.

Lopaz wandered in from the garden behind the garages, where he had been tending the flowerbeds, and Maria collapsed on his small stocky frame, her voice growing shriller and shriller as she explained the morning's events. He took them both through to the kitchen, poured two mugs of strong coffee and then disappeared into the garden again, almost at a run.

They drank the strong liquorice-tasting coffee in subdued silence, each lost in her own thoughts, and then Maria leant across the spotlessly scrubbed wooden table and took Nina by the hand, her face warm with understanding.

'The *senor*, he is missing you. It is not nice for Senor James to come here. He is not a good boy.'

Nina nodded in quiet agreement—he certainly was not a good boy.

'I will make it OK.' Maria's black head bobbed reassuringly as she spoke. 'You spend the day here, in the garden?'

Nina nodded again, hugging the small Spanish woman impulsively as she left the shining kitchen. Wandering upstairs, she collected a book from her bedroom and returned downstairs to find Maria already

busy at work, her capable brown hands deftly rolling paper-thin pastry.

'Go, go.' The housekeeper gestured smilingly to the garden door. 'You sit in the sun.' As Nina stepped into the white sunlight the heat settled on her like a warm blanket. The large gardens were meticulously well kept, the regimented flowerbeds and smooth green lawns beautifully tended unto: the tall, still pine trees.

Further away from the house in a small incline out of the wind, a tiny orchard sat drowsing in the warmth, surrounded by thick stone walls mellowed with age. The wiry grass was long and unkempt under the bent old trees, threaded with tiny forget-me-nots and perky little daisies, and it was here Nina made for, spreading out the old rug she had brought with her and lying back with a contented little sigh in the perfumed golden air. She could hear the distant whisper of the sea and a slight murmur in the pines, the odd lazy insect droning from flower to flower; otherwise it was blissfully quiet and peaceful.

She spent the day alternately reading and drowsing under the shady trees, returning briefly to the house to eat the cold lunch Maria had prepared, carrying the dessert of fresh black grapes and juicy red cherries back to her little hidey-hole. The air was growing cooler, although it was still pleasantly warm, and Maria informed her a storm was expected to end the unusual hot spell. The few days in the sun had tinted her silky skin a rich honey-brown, lightening her blonde hair and smoothing away the constant look of anxiety on her face.

She was awakened from deep slumber in the late afternoon by a light kiss on her mouth, and opened heavy eyes to see James's carefully smiling face a few inches from her own. Mauve shadows were lengthening under the trees, and birds were beginning to call evensong in the cypresses and pines preparing for the velvet night ahead.

'Sorry, Nina.' He spoke before she could order her thoughts, his face watchful. 'I keep forgetting you aren't one of Steed's normal little "friends".' There it was again, that subtle spiteful innuendo regarding Steed's love-life.

'Leave Steed out of this, please.' His eyes narrowed at her tone as she sat up, smoothing her dress over her knees. 'Has Maria spoken to you?'

'I haven't seen Maria. Why?'

She looked into the confident young face before her, seeing the weakness and vanity normally concealed by the classically fine features. 'Steed phoned after you'd gone this morning. He isn't too thrilled with you.'

James shrugged, but not before she had noticed the look of fear flash over his face, swiftly masked. 'So, tell me something new!'

'Why did you tell me he knew you were here when it wasn't true? What was the point?'

'Maybe I couldn't wait to see the wonder-woman who had snared my dear cousin.' His voice was still playful but with an underlying nastiness that made Nina suddenly realise the orchard was a long way from the house.

'Don't you like Steed?' She tried to keep her voice neutral. She had been right when she'd felt something was wrong with this handsome young man; there was something quite menacing in those bright blue eyes. A tiny shiver trickled down her spine. An original human chameleon.

'Not particularly.' His gaze wandered away from hers and he stood looking out towards the darkening coastline, just visible through a

break in the pines, his profile like that of a magnificent Greek statue. 'But then there are very few people I do have any affection for.' A slight breeze ruffled the pale hair.

'Why not? What's happened to make you feel like that?'

He brought his eyes back to her with visible effort, his thoughts lost in a cloudy past that made his face alarmingly hard. 'Happened?' He laughed coldly. 'Nothing much has happened to me. If you're looking for a dramatic story, forget it. My life has been a succession of nannies, tutors and then boarding-school. What you see before you now has been shaped and moulded by people paid to look after me. Some of them were kind, and some not so kind.' He shrugged. 'It didn't do my brother any harm, so why should I complain? I can look after myself. I take what I want now.'

'All children are different,' Nina said quietly, her heart swamped with pity for the mixed-up young man in front of her. He was like a blighted fruit, beautiful on the outside but marred within.

He intuitively sensed her sympathy and was quick to capitalise on it. Kneeling quickly by her side in one fluid movement, he took her hands in his own before she realised what was happening. 'Don't shut me out,' he said softly, his blue eyes beguiling. 'Let's be friends.'

'I don't want to shut you out, James.' Nina kept her voice calm and cool. 'Of course we can be friends, but let's go back to the house for now and have some dinner.' The swiftly encroaching dusk had enfolded them in intimate solitude, and Nina felt a prickle of panic shiver down her spine. She should have moved away while they were talking.

'You do like me, don't you?' He sounded like a small boy, and with a dart of fear Nina realised the playboy exterior housed a disturbed soul within. A glint of red glowed deep in his eyes, and although his

expression hadn't changed he suddenly seemed like a different person.

'Of course I like you.' She struggled to stand, but he was holding her arms in a vice-like grip.

'Prove it, then.' They both knew what he meant. He ran his tongue over his lips, his eyes unblinking.

'Don't be silly, James. Let me go. Steed won't like this.' It was the wrong approach. At the mention of his cousin's name he flushed scarlet, then paled, his eyes running like live things over her body. With one deft movement he flung himself on top of her, still holding her arms in a steel grip, toppling her backwards on to the rug. She began to kick and twist against his superior weight, jerking her head from side to side as his wet lips sought her mouth.

'Don't fight it. You know you want me really; they all do.' As his mouth found hers she felt a wave of hot revulsion cause her stomach to clench, and lashed out with her legs wildly. They found their mark. He gasped deep in his throat and his grip lessened for a fraction of time, his face falling away from hers.

'Steed!' Her despairing cry rang out into the still night, causing a mad fluttering of wings in the branches around them, and then James's hand came across her mouth and nose, stopping her air supply.

'Bitch.' The flat tone was venomous, all the more chilling in its quietness. Her struggles were weaker now, a hazy blackness from her aching lungs causing her head to spin and her dazed eyes to dilate. He was going to show her no mercy; his weight was crushing her.

There was a sharp explosion by her face, and then the bruising weight was gone. She drew breath desperately into her burning chest,

gasping with pain. As the darkness receded she was vaguely aware of being lifted, and tried to fight the arms holding her limp body.

'You're all right, Nina. It's me. Everything's all right.' It sounded like Steed's voice, and although she knew it was impossible she stopped her struggles and let herself fall into the rushing blackness coming to meet her, drowning in its consuming silence.

CHAPTER FOUR

NINA came out of the swirling confusion of unconsciousness to find herself lying on her bed. She lay for a moment, her head swimming with a thousand images and her eyes heavy and aching, trying to collect her thoughts. Maria was fluttering around her, stroking her forehead and murmuring incomprehensible words of comfort in rapid Spanish.

As she moved her head slowly she was aware of a tall dark shadow by the window, and raised herself slightly to see Steed watching her in cold silence.

'Well?' The air was electric and she saw he was furiously angry, his grey eyes glittering dangerously.

'What happened?' Her voice was weak and he barked a sharp laugh.

"That's my line."

'I don't understand.'

'You and me both.' His voice was shaking with rage. 'I gave express orders that James was to get his marching orders this morning, and instead -' His voice cracked and he turned sharply to gaze out into the darkness, his broad back rigid.

'He was away all day,' Nina protested, her voice quivering. 'I was reading in the garden when he came back and——'

'I can work out the rest,' he interrupted scathingly. 'I just want to know one thing and I want the truth, Nina. Did you give him any encouragement?'

'Encouragement?' She stared at him blankly, and then as realisation swept over her she turned scarlet, her whole body trembling. 'No, I didn't encourage him. How can you ask me that?'

'How can I ask?' The words were Arctic-cold. 'I'll tell you how I can ask. James is an attractive man, more your age than I am. I understand women like him, and you were alone together in a romantic setting. Do I have to spell it out? I want the truth.'

'I told you the truth.' Her eyes were blinded with tears. 'Perhaps some women do like him, but I don't.' She shivered helplessly. 'I really don't like him, Steed.' Her voice ended on a plea, and her face was deathly white.

He shook himself suddenly and strode over to the bed, pushing Maria roughly away and gathering her up into his arms. 'OK, baby, OK,' he whispered into her shining hair as sobs began to tear her body apart. 'I had to ask, sweetheart. Cry it out.' He held her tightly against his chest until the tears subsided, his face taut and grey. Maria reappeared, holding a large brandy goblet.

'Drink it,' Steed ordered, feeling tiny tremors of shock still shaking her body. 'All of it.' Protesting weakly, she forced down a little of the fiery liquid, gasping as it burnt its way into her stomach. 'Come on, there wasn't much there; drain the glass, and then Maria will help you undress and bring you something to eat in bed.'

'Where are you going?' Nina asked miserably, panic rising in her voice as he walked purposefully towards the door.

'To finish something I started,' he replied harshly, his face grim.

'Please, Steed.' She half rose in the bed and then, as the combination of shock, exhaustion and neat alcohol overwhelmed her, she sank

back against the pillows with a small bewildered cry. He was back by her side again in an instant, his face savage.

'Will you do as you as told, you little fool? Just lie still. Maria will give you a sedative when you've eaten, and it will all seem different in the morning. He didn't hurt you, did he?' His face suddenly drained of colour. 'It looked as though I was in time. He didn't...?'

'No.' Nina dropped her eyes shyly, her eyelashes fluttering on her hot cheeks. 'He just scared me, that's all.'

'I'll kill him.'

'No, please...' Fear for him and the consequences of what he might do caused her voice to rise shrilly, and he met her. glance directly, his expression freezing.

'I thought you didn't like him.'

'I don't.' Wearily she brushed a strand of golden hair from her face. 'But if you hurt him...'

'I've already done that.' The words carried immense satisfaction as his hands clenched into fists by his side and she remembered the violent crack she had heard, and saw the knuckles on his right hand were dripping blood.

'You're hurt.' Horrified, she gazed up at him, her violet eyes huge.

'You ought to see the other fella,' said Steed with grim humour. 'You needn't try and stop me—he's had this coming for a long time. When I think if I hadn't come back today...'

He was gone before she could say anything else, and she stared in helpless appeal at Maria, who shook her head slowly and shrugged in typical Latin style. 'He is your man; what do you expect?' the

housekeeper said philosophically, opening the door to Nina's bathroom and turning on the shower.

Much to Nina's embarrassment the housekeeper insisted on remaining with her while she showered, tucking her up in bed afterwards as though she were a tiny child. Her thoughts were churning wildly as Maria left to fetch her a snack, and by sheer will-power she put all thoughts of James's groping hands and hot mouth out of her mind, concentrating instead on her anxiety for Steed. He had been so coldly determined.

She was struggling to eat the feather-light omelette Maria had cooked when he returned, the huge lump in her throat threatening to choke her with every mouthful.

She looked up as he entered the bedroom, her damp hair brushed to demure order and the high-necked buttoned nightdress she wore adding to the overall impression of a young schoolgirl.

'You can sleep in peace. He's taken the Mercedes and vanished. No doubt I shall have a phone call telling me where the car is eventually.'

'I'm sorry, Steed.'

'Don't apologise when it's not necessary.' His voice was brusque.

'But the business deal and everything. You shouldn't have come back.' She pushed the tray away dispiritedly.

He stood leaning against the open door, his arms crossed and with a strange expression on his taciturn face. 'I damn well should have. I've followed my instincts all my life and they haven't let me down yet.' He moved restlessly. 'I should never have sent you here by yourself in the first place, but you seemed so exhausted in London. I thought Maria and Lopaz could take care of you until I arrived. It was a

mistake that you nearly had to pay for.' His eyes glinted. 'I hadn't reckoned on James's reptilian ability for ferreting out anything new.'

'He isn't normal, Steed... not to behave like that.'

'He'll be even less normal by the time I've finished with him,' he said grimly. Nina shivered in spite of the warm room.

'No, I mean it. I think he needs help.'

'I'll help him, all right.' His voice was pure steel. 'I intend to whip that young man until his back is raw. He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, which he has used to his advantage ever since he could toddle. How his mother and mine were born of the same parents I will never know. She is a bit of candy-floss without an idea in her pretty little head, and James has always run rings around her. Unfortunately my uncle worships the ground she walks on, and consequently the pair of them have got away with murder.'

With a slight nod in her direction he stepped backwards. 'I shall deal with James as I see fit, Nina. This time he pays for his fun.' He closed the door with a firm click.

She had made him even more angry. She swallowed the two white pills Maria had placed on the tray with a sip of water and slid under the covers, convinced she would lie awake most of the night, reliving the nightmare, sick at heart.

She awoke late the next morning after a deep, refreshing sleep to find the room filled with soft grey light, and lay in a dazed stupor. A steady rhythmic drumming slowly infiltrated her consciousness and she looked towards the leaded windows, where fat raindrops were leaving shining trails down the smooth glass like a million bright diamonds.

It was raining, here! She sat up slowly, bruised muscles crying out in protest, amazed to find she must have fallen asleep immediately the night before. A chair had been placed close to the bed and a newspaper lay across its cane seat, the Spanish words indecipherable. Maria must have sat with her for part of the night. She felt a warm rush of gratitude towards the small Spanish woman for her thoughtfulness.

She showered slowly, washing her hair under the warm water, rubbing it vigorously as though to erase all memory of the night before. She dressed in jeans and a warm sweater—the air had a definite bite after the sultry warmth of the last few days—and was brushing her damp hair into a high, sleek pony-tail when a gentle tap sounded at the bedroom door.

'Come in,' she called brightly, expecting to see Maria's small, plump shape as the door opened, but instead Steed's tall, lean body stood in the doorway, his dark face relaxed and heavy-lidded eyes cool. She looked down hastily, her pulse beating fast, the unexpected sight of him causing her breath to catch in her throat.

'How are you feeling this morning?' he asked lazily, his deep velvet voice sending shivers over her skin. She mumbled a reply, keeping her eyes lowered, horrified to feel warm colour staining her cheeks. What was the matter with her? She was acting like a girl on her first date.

He came swiftly across to where she sat in front of the small ornate dressing-table and gently lifted her chin, his grey gaze searching her eyes seriously. 'Don't be embarrassed, not with me.' He smiled tenderly. 'This is a new day, yesterday is a forgotten dream, and tomorrow is what you make it. Live for today.'

She, nodded mistily, thankful he had mistaken her confusion for shyness over yesterday's episode with James. She saw the strong jaw

stiffen as his fingers left her chin to trace the blue marks staining her lower arms left by James's cruel grip, but he said nothing, merely tightening his mouth into a thin line.

'Some old friends of mine have asked us to call by,' he said lightly after a long moment. 'I would like you to meet them.' There were times when a certain inflexion in his perfect English hinted at the Spanish heritage Maria had outlined, and she longed to ask him more about his family and upbringing, but held back, convinced he would think she was merely being nosy.

'That would be lovely,' she replied, trying to match his carefree tone. 'Do you want me to change?'

His narrowed eyes swept over her slim body appreciatively and he shook his black head slowly. 'You look good enough to eat.' Their linked gaze held and intensified, and deep in the pit of her stomach she felt a slow ache begin to throb in time with her heartbeat.

'Would it be in order for me to kiss my fiancée good morning?' he asked as his eyes fell to her mouth, and she nodded slowly as he raised her to her feet. Bending over, he brushed her mouth fleetingly with his cool lips, his touch gentle. She noticed a tiny muscle working in his hard jaw as he straightened and stood looking down at her, his expression slightly satirical. 'You are causing me to exercise a self-discipline I never knew I had,' he drawled mockingly after a moment. 'It feels so bad that I'm sure it must be good for me.'

She looked at him in bewilderment and he laughed quietly, his grey eyes bright with self-derision. 'You haven't a clue what I'm talking about, have you?' She shook her head doubtfully as he raised his hand and traced a path down her soft cheek.

'Isobel did have a point after all, you know. Your father did rather keep you like the princess in the ivory tower.'

'He didn't,' she returned quickly, her eyes flashing, and he laughed again, his dark gaze more intent.

'Can I kiss you as I would like to, then?' he asked lazily, and she stared at him uncertainly without replying. This time his mouth moulded and parted her lips in sweetly searching arousal, his arms pulling her against his hard-muscled body until she could feel his outline against hers. Pleasure flooded tiny goose-pimples along her limbs, and as his mouth worked its subtle magic on hers she began to feel a heavy, languid warmth spread through her veins. All memory of James's violent assault was washed from her mind as Steed's slow love- making cleaned and healed the wound, drawing tiny flickering flames of desire from deep inside her body. As she began to respond to his kiss her arms tightened round his strong neck, and without realising it she pressed closer into his body, fitting against him like the last piece of a jigsaw.

It was Steed who drew away a few seconds later with a small sound deep in his throat. 'Hoist with my own petard,' he said thickly. 'You certainly are an apt pupil, sweetheart.' It was the second time he had used that endearment and, although she realised it probably didn't mean anything to him, it sounded good.

'Nina, I want to take it nice and slowly, but there's something I must know. You aren't still frightened of me, are you?' He moved back a pace and thrust his hands into his pockets as he kept his eyes tight on her face. 'I know things went too fast for you that night at the party and -'

She interrupted him quickly; after last night she didn't feel up to any soul-searching. 'I'm not frightened of you.' Her brow wrinkled. 'I don't know if I ever was, not really. I can't explain. I felt somehow that you threatened everything I knew, all the ordinary things...' Her voice trailed away and they stood looking at each other, his expression sardonic and faintly amused.

'And now?'

'You've been marvellous, Steed. I'm very grateful,' she said quickly, and his face darkened ominously.

'I don't want your thanks,' he growled softly, his face menacing. 'I want to know how you feel about me.'

She looked at him nervously through her lashes. 'I like you, Steed; you've been so good to me. I'm sorry... I don't know what else to say,' she finished weakly as his expression didn't change. James's words had flashed through her brain like lightning. Steed never wanted romantic involvement. He chose his women for their sophisticated awareness, their ability to play the love- game and then move on with no rancour to the next beau. She couldn't play that game; she didn't know the rules and she didn't want to learn them. If she gave her heart to Steed it would be forever, and he would look on that as a millstone around his neck.

She looked into his cold grey eyes. He would expect a light affair from her and nothing more, a mere blending of bodies. Maybe, in spite of all he had said that night at Grayfields, he looked upon his proposal as the right to a full marriage and all that that entailed. She looked up abruptly, her thoughts written plainly on her face. 'Steed, if you've changed your mind I understand. It's not too late to call everything off...' Her voice faltered to a halt as his jaw ground slowly.

'You don't look on me as a father-figure, do you?' he asked suddenly, his expression horrified. It was obvious that complication hadn't dawned on him before.

She smiled at the look on his face in spite of herself. 'No, I can promise you that idea has never crossed my mind,' she said slowly as his face relaxed slightly. If only he had said one word of love to her

since they had met. He made it plain he found her desirable, and his reaction to James's presence showed he valued her as a possession, but she wanted more than that from him. As her thoughts led her into areas she had tried to shut down in her consciousness her agitation increased. She didn't want to be one link in a long chain, and a pretty weak link, at that. She knew none of the tricks women played to dazzle a man of the world like him, and he would tire of her immediately he won the chase. She mustn't let him suspect what she now acknowledged was the truth: that she loved him, had always loved him. Even at sixteen, all those years ago, in the midst of his mockery, she had known he was the one man who could turn her safe little world upside-down.

Some vestige of her thoughts must have shown in her face, as Steed sighed deeply, his face wry. 'I think you've been sent to keep me humble,' he muttered to himself as he walked to the door. 'No one could accuse you of bolstering my ego, that's for sure. In my world of sycophants and charlatans you stick out like the proverbial sore thumb.'

She looked searchingly at his sombre face but could read nothing there to encourage her to tell him the truth. He was his old self again, heart-wrenchingly handsome, cool and aloof, his dark masculinity vibrant and dangerous. 'And don't say it,' he warned ferociously as he paused in the doorway, his hair gleaming blue-black.

'Don't say what?' She looked at him, thankful he didn't have the ability to read her mind.

'That you're sorry. I really couldn't take it.' With that he bowed slightly and was gone, leaving an electric tension in the air so real that it almost crackled.

A weak sun was struggling to surface behind dove-grey clouds as they left the house an hour later. The torrential rain had stopped,

leaving a fresh new world gleaming with bright colour, the clean air heavy with the rich perfume of bountiful vegetation. Deep salmon rose blossoms, pink hibiscus and a riot of trailing honeysuckle fought for supremacy on the old stone walls surrounding the house, vying with pale pink dog roses and vivid orange trumpet-like flowers that clung to every crevice in the aged walls.

'It's all so beautiful,' Nina breathed as she settled herself into the small jeep Steed was driving.

He looked at her, his fine, chiselled face warm and relaxed, showing no signs of their earlier conversation. 'You're seeing it at its best before the heat of summer dries everything up,' he said slowly, 'but there is no place on earth quite like this for me.' His eyes flicked away and she realised he was revealing a small part of himself to her. 'I was born here and I will be content to die here.'

'Don't say that,' said Nina quickly, touching his muscled arm hesitantly with the tips of her fingers.

'I didn't mean in the foreseeable future,' he returned, smiling slightly at her nervous expression and patting her hand casually, although the grey eyes were tight on her face. 'I'd like to leave my sons in residence first to carry on the illustrious Charlton name. Any suggestions how quickly you think that might be accomplished?' Her cheeks burned and he chuckled softly to himself, muttering something quietly in Spanish that sounded almost like an endearment.

'I apologise for the somewhat basic mode of transport,' he said after a time as the small jeep bumped along the rough-hewn road travelling even further into the low, rolling hills. 'Lopaz looks on Gina as his own,' he continued, patting the dashboard fondly, 'but with my dear cousin absconding with the Mercedes I'm afraid she's all we've got for today.'

'I don't mind,' Nina protested stoutly. 'I like this better than the Mercedes anyway—it's more friendly.'

He looked at her in amazed incredulity and then burst out laughing, the deep, rich tones echoing round the confined space. 'You're going to be an easy wife to please,' he said, controlling his amusement with visible effort. 'No other woman of my acquaintance could honestly say she preferred this old heap to my beautiful Mercedes.'

'Perhaps you haven't been mixing with the right women, then,' Nina replied tartly, causing the heavy black eyebrows to rise in nodding assent, his face suddenly serious as he glanced at her pure profile.

'Now, you could be right there,' he agreed slowly, swerving violently to avoid a wandering goat strolling lazily across the tufted road with a small necklace of bells round its white neck. 'I always knew my little kitten had sharp claws,' he continued as though to himself, slanting a sly glance at her face, which was turning a vivid shade of pink. He laughed softly as she flounced round in her seat, pretending an intense interest in the scenery flashing past the open window.

It was lunchtime when they reached their destination. Steed parked in a small curve in the road, and after helping her out of the jeep pointed down the valley to where a small stone house was just visible through the foliage of a large olive grove. There was no other habitation for miles around, just a battered old truck to one side of the dusty dirt track. 'Pedro and his family live down there,' Steed said shortly, watching her face closely.

'Oh, Steed, it's lovely,' she said in surprised pleasure, 'what a gorgeous place to live.' She had expected his friends to be high-fliers in the social whirl, mentally preparing herself for barbed innuendoes and veiled searching questions as to her suitability to be his consort. This tiny whitewashed house, hidden among the olive trees and cacti

with its brown thatched roof of dried turf, was not at all what she had pictured.

He appeared satisfied at her reaction, taking her arm firmly and guiding her among the low branches as they walked towards the cottage. As they neared the building she noticed a large pen holding several fat well-fed goats, which were bleating noisily at their approach.

'Pedro and Carmel are my oldest friends,' he explained softly as they approached the small wooden front door. 'We grew up together until I was eight, when my father took me to America for my education, but he always allowed my mother and me to come home here to my grandparents' home for the holidays. Then the three of us, along with some other children from the village school, would run riot all summer. The others tended to draw away from me after a time - ' his face didn't change, but something in the low voice told Nina the childrens' defection had hurt the boy Steed deeply '—but Pedro and Carmel were always the same. I danced at their wedding ten years ago, and they have six children now.' She glanced at him in open amazement and he chuckled quietly. 'The Spanish are a virile lot.' He shot a wicked glance at her. 'I'm half-Spanish.'

The door of the small cottage suddenly burst open and a veritable stream of chanting, laughing children descended on Steed in an overwhelming flood. Moving hastily to one side against the protection of a bent old tree, Nina watched in rapt fascination as they climbed all over the big, lean frame, calling his name shrilly and shouting in rapid Spanish. With a bright-eyed toddler in his arms and two curly black-haired urchins clinging to his back, Steed stumbled towards the cottage door, where a small, stocky dark man was shouting instructions to the children, which they patently ignored.

A tall, slim woman joined the throng, waving her arms and pulling one child from Steed's back, whereupon another immediately took its

place. It was a good five minutes before some sort of order was restored, by which time a form of introduction had taken place and Nina and Steed were settled in two battered easy chairs, the latter groaning under the weight of Steed and four toddlers of assorted ages. Two older children stood at the side of his chair, stroking his arm now and then: a young dark-eyed girl as pretty as her mother, and a small boy who was the very image of Pedro.

'The babies, they adore him!' explained Carmel laughingly to Nina as she gestured towards Steed lovingly, and as he smiled back at the slim Spanish woman, his face open and all wariness gone from his eyes, something pierced Nina's heart like a sword. He never smiled at her like that. She winced visibly.

'What is it?' He was by her side instantly as children scattered in all directions, and she smiled shakily as she shrugged an answer.

'You're tired and bruised after yesterday,' he said grimly, 'it's to be expected.' He spoke swiftly in his native tongue to Pedro and Carmel, and as the concern on their faces changed to deep anger Carmel knelt by her chair, her long black hair sweeping Nina's arm.

'That James, he is a pig,' she said slowly and distinctly, and Nina looked questioningly at Steed, her pale face flushing with embarrassment.

'I just explained he had pushed his luck,' Steed said shortly. 'We're with friends, Nina; you can relax here. No questions or reprisals.' She stared at him wordlessly, her violet eyes huge with reproach, and he stood up abruptly, clearly irritated by her censure.

Carmel's brown gaze darted from one to another and she too stood up, her lithe full-breasted figure so different from that of her small plump husband. 'Come and see upstairs, Nina,' she invited, turning with a swift meaningful glance to Pedro and nodding at Steed, who

was standing with his back to them, looking out through the open doorway.

Nina found the house fascinating. It was larger than she had first thought, and spotlessly clean, but still incredibly tiny to house a family of eight with no running water or normal amenities. A crystal-clear stream ran in a slight hollow a few yards from the cottage, its sparkling water pure and clean, and a small outhouse at the side of the main building held a large wood-burning stove and cooking utensils, with strings of onions and various cuts of meat hanging from its smoke-blackened ceiling.

'I can understand it must be good here in the summer when the weather's fine, but how do you all manage in the winter months?' Nina asked Carmel as they sat on the big window-seat in one of the two bedrooms looking out over the rolling hills and blue sky.

The tall Spanishwoman burst into laughter. 'I don't! ' She grimaced slightly. 'We only come here when it is warm; we go back to Panthoss before winter.' She explained they spent the cold winter months in the huge town house they shared with Pedro's parents and assorted brothers and sisters and their respective families. 'We are very many,' Carmel said carefully, holding ten fingers up several times in front of Nina's face. 'Steed, he buy as this for just Pedro and me. It was, how you say, the wedding present?' Nina nodded her understanding, glimpsing another facet of the complex personality of the man she had promised to marry. It must have been wonderful through the years for Stead's friends to know they could spend their summers alone with their family.

They ate lunch sitting by the pebbled stream on thick coarse rugs spread over the damp grass, the children splashing with shouts of glee in the icy shallow water. The air was warm again and faintly perfumed by the tiny flowers dotted in the meadow on the other side

of the stream. There was a sweet restfulness in being with the young family that Nina found very soothing.

The meal was a simple one of pungent tasty goat's cheese, cold smoked bacon and garlic bread, washed down with goat's milk for the children and a spicy red wine for the adults which made Nina cough helplessly at the first sip.

'Would you prefer milk?' Steed asked gravely with a small smile twitching at the side of his firm mouth as he noticed her streaming eyes.

'Yes, please,' Nina said gratefully, turning to Pedro and Carmel as he poured her a glass of the frothy white liquid and explaining she wasn't used to wine.

'No, I can vouch for that,' Steed affirmed with a wicked look in his eyes as he handed her the glass of foaming milk. 'Wine has the strangest effect on her.' Nina blushed hotly and the Spanish couple exchanged an intimate smile, changing the subject adroitly.

The four younger children were becoming truculent as they finished the impromptu picnic, flicking handfuls of water on to the watching adults and running screaming through the long grass on the other side of the stream.

'Come on, you little monkeys,' Pedro said firmly, giving two wriggling bodies to Carmel and whisking two more into his muscled brown arms. 'Time for a nap.'

'Would you like to go for a walk?' Steed suggested as the family made their way back to the cottage with much cajoling and threatening by the harassed parents. 'It will give the children a chance to go to sleep. I tend to have a distracting influence on them.'

'I had noticed!' Nina laughed as she gazed up into his face. 'They adore you, though, don't they?' And who wouldn't? she thought to herself as she stood up slowly, watching him through her lashes as he gazed across the sparkling water to the sunlit hills beyond. The sun was directly overhead now, but the harsh heat of the last few days had vanished with the night's storm to be replaced by a soft, languid warmth, reminiscent of an English summer.

He swung her gently across the narrow brook on to the wiry grass beyond, calling their attention to Pedro, who replied with a raised hand and a huge grin. Among the sturdy blades of grass the meadow had a carpet of tiny white and blue flowers, their starry faces turned up to the deep blue sky above. Nina knelt to look more closely at their fragile beauty. 'It seems such a shame to walk on them,' she murmured sadly, noticing small sprigs of thyme peeping out from the grey rocks scattered here and there.

'I'll carry you if you like,' Steed offered immediately, his grey eyes mocking, and she shook her head in laughing refusal, picking a few green leaves of thyme and inhaling the aromatic perfume of the tiny herb.

'Come on, let's walk,' he said impatiently, pulling her up by her hand, which he then kept in his own large fist, nonchalantly matching his superior stride to hers. Her small hand trembled slightly in his grasp but he appeared not to notice, pointing out the majestic circular sweep of the hills in the distance, their outline black against the foreign sky.

'You were a great hit back there,' he said casually as they wandered through the meadow, reaching the uneven hillside that stretched as far as the eye could see. 'If I didn't know better I would have thought you'd met them years ago.'

'It felt like that,' Nina agreed, sensing warm approval in his deep voice. 'They are good people.'

'The best,' Steed agreed, looking down at her with grey eyes crinkled against the sun. 'Pedro makes enough on the family fishing boat to get by, and Carmel works in some of the big hotels cleaning in the summer months to get them through the winter. They're as poor as church mice, but rich in everything that matters.'

'I'm surprised -' Nina began but stopped abruptly, suddenly aware she had been about to be very tactless.

'Yes?' Steed had let go of her hand and positioned himself on a large grey rock, its surface smooth and warm, and his eyes flicked over her intently, noticing the expression on her face. 'What were you going to say?'

'Nothing really.' She flushed slightly. 'I was just going to ask you how you have kept in contact with them through the years.'

'No, you weren't.' His voice was barbed. 'You were going to say you were *surprised* I have kept contact with them during the years. I asked you once before and I'm asking you again, what exactly do you think of me? I have the strangest feeling that I'm neatly tagged and labelled in that little computer in your brain, put in a tidy slot marked "untouchable, danger—may contaminate". Does that about sum it up?'

'No,' she answered indignantly, amazed he could misjudge her so totally, while being secretly relieved he didn't suspect her true feelings for him.

'Why were you surprised, then? Explain.'

She looked at him miserably. 'Well, you're a successful travelled businessman and everything. You're so wealthy, whereas they...' Her voice trailed into silence.

He listened to her stammering without moving, his black head tilted to one side and his eyes shooting steel darts. 'Charming. You have a lot to learn about me, my dear,' he said frostily. 'I do not abandon my friends or compromise my principles to fit in with my lifestyle. I may be rich, but if all my wealth were gone tomorrow I would still survive because of what's in here.' He banged his chest with a clenched hand. 'I somehow thought you were the same.'

'I am.' Her drooping head snapped up at his last words. 'I do live by my own standards. I don't go from affair to affair like some people...' She stopped. She had said more than she'd intended.

His face was livid. 'Meaning I do? And who has been telling you all these wonderful fairy-stories about the big, bad wolf?'

She flinched at the contempt in his voice. 'James said that you had lots of women friends, that you liked to keep things free and light -'

'And you believed every word, of course.' His voice dripped ice. 'James is such a reliable source of information, isn't he? You didn't consider it necessary to ask me about it or wait a little before you made a judgement? But of course not; how silly of me. His tales fitted perfectly into the picture you've always had of me, didn't they? You've always considered me on the same level as something that's crawled out from under a stone, and now it would seem I have risen to the dizzy heights of a worthless Romeo and shallow speculator. Delightful.'

Fear trickled down her spine at the red fury in his eyes. 'As it happens, my dear cousin is partly right,' he continued, fixing her with his gaze like a hunter with its prey. 'I do have many women friends.'

Some of them are merely friends and others have been something more.' Her stomach somersaulted. 'That is in the past. I was foolish enough to think it could remain there. However, you have at last made your opinion of me very plain, for which I thank you.' He rose, clicking his heels together in a small bow, his foreign blood suddenly very obvious. 'I think it is time we return and make our farewells.' He strode away.

She stumbled after him, stricken with remorse but quite at a loss to know what to do or say to put matters right. 'Please, I'm sorry...'

'I'm sick to death of hearing you say that!' He swung round at her words, his face savage and black with anger. 'I'm running rapidly out of patience with this whole ridiculous farce, so just give it a rest, Nina, if you know what's good for you.'

She followed him down the narrow hill path and on to the rough surface of the meadow at a run, his large strides in no way allowing for her small steps. His words had left her numb; her only intention now was to keep up with him and return to the villa and the safety of her bedroom as soon as possible.

The sharp triangle of rock that caused her to stumble also cut through her sandal like a hot knife through butter, and as she fell the breath was knocked out of her body in a screaming gasp. She landed in a curled heap, her chest burning and her throat rasping for air, unaware that blood was pumping furiously from the deep gash in her foot, staining her cotton dress with red droplets and splattering her bent arms and legs crimson.

CHAPTER FIVE

STEED was kneeling beside her as her lungs stopped their labouring, his face grey with shock. 'Nina?' He smoothed back the loose golden hair that had fallen round her face, wiping a smudge of brick-red dirt from her cheek. 'Where are you hurt?'

He lifted her into a sitting position carefully, laying her back against his chest, and her dazed eyes widened at the sight of all the blood. 'It's just my foot, I think,' she murmured huskily, feeling better now she could breathe easily again.

'Thank goodness.' His warm fingers touched the gaping wound, causing her to wince. 'I thought you'd hurt your head.' He took off his short-sleeved shirt and wrapped it hastily around her foot in a giant bandage. 'It will need stitching, I'm afraid.'

He lifted her carefully, cradling her in his arms, her face pressed against his broad bare chest. 'All right? Do you feel faint?'

'No,' she whispered softly, the sensation of being held in his arms next to his warm skin driving all lucid thought from her head. 'It doesn't even hurt.'

'It will,' he said grimly, walking back to the cottage almost at a run, holding her as lightly as though she were a child. She could feel his heart beating madly, and the curly black hairs covering his chest were wiry against her soft cheeks; she felt light-headed with the longing to run her hands through their dark mass.

* * *

The next day her foot throbbed with hot needles of pain, and she was glad to spend the day resting in bed as the doctor had suggested. Steed had driven straight to the nearest hospital after rushed farewells

to a stunned Pedro and Carmel, whereupon the smiling young doctor had put four stitches into the cut, which had seemed to affect Steed more than her, causing his face to blanch and beads of sweat break out on his forehead.

Once back at the villa, he had called Maria to help her wash and get into bed, and then had almost fed her the tempting evening meal that Maria had brought to her room, giving her the sedative the doctor had prescribed immediately she had finished. She had been asleep almost as he'd left the room, waking once in the night as a sharp stab of pain had cut into her drugged dreams, but then falling back into deep slumber at once.

'I'm sorry to be such a nuisance,' she apologised to Maria as the housekeeper brought her lunch on a tray. Hie lobster salad looked delicious and she was surprised to find she was ravenously hungry, having slept through breakfast. 'Thank you for sitting with me the other night,' she continued as the little woman bustled round the room, straightening her pillows and smoothing the fine silk sheets.

'Sitting?' The plump face was puzzled, and then as comprehension dawned Maria smiled slowly, clucking her tongue and shaking her black head. 'No, no.' She settled Nina back on the fluffy pillows placing the tray carefully on her lap. 'The *senor*, he sit with you.'

'Steed?' Nina flushed scarlet.

"The *senor* thought maybe you would have the bad dreams. He sit with you all night. Now you eat.' After Maria had gone Nina sat quietly, absorbing what the small woman had told her. He had cared enough to stay with her all night until he was sure James's rough handling had not caused her to suffer any ill effects. A small smile played at the corner of her mouth. It was a start, a small ray of hope that she was more to him than just a passing fancy.

She waited all afternoon for Steed to visit her, but dusk was casting cool mauve shadows into the darkening room when he popped his black head round the half-open door. 'How's the invalid?' His voice was friendly but there was a withdrawn expression on his handsome face as he stood just inside the room, the dying light from the window throwing his high cheekbones into sharp relief.

'Fine, thank you.' It wasn't true. The ache in her foot had magnified through the long afternoon of waiting for his footsteps. 'Maria said you sat with me the night James left.' She smiled warmly, her mouth straightening slightly as he turned his head from her glance.

'Think nothing of it.' There was a definite coolness in his tone. 'The doctor said the stitches can come out in a few days. Once you are recovered I would like to bring the boys out for a short holiday to meet you. Would that be convenient?' It was as though he was talking to a difficult employee, and with a start of misery Nina realised that in a way that was exactly what she was.

'Perfectly.' She matched her tone to his.

'Once that is accomplished and we return to England I can see no reason for any delay with the arrangements.' The cool voice was hurting her more than she would have thought possible. 'I suggested the middle of May to the caterers as a good time for the wedding. If you agree we can send the invitations out as soon as we get back. Carol has already ordered a supply.' His voice was clinical—they could have been discussing a television programme rather than the joining together of two lives.

'Yes, May is all right. It doesn't really matter, does it?' Her voice was listless, and he glanced sharply at her in the dim light.

'Doesn't it?' Just for a moment there was a spark of something in his voice, but then he turned away, his face sombre. 'I have to go back to

England tonight. I've checked with my uncle, and James is back home again. I explained the situation and you will have no more trouble from that quarter.' His voice was dismissive. He obviously couldn't wait to leave. 'I shall bring Jason and Peter out with me on my return unless you inform me to the contrary.'

She felt hot tears pricking at the backs of her eyes and kept her head lowered, the blonde curtain of hair hiding her face in a shimmering veil. He clearly had meant what he'd said yesterday: he considered their marriage a ridiculous farce. She heard him move across the room and kiss the top of her head lightly, and then he was gone, the door shutting with a final-sounding click.

The next few days dragged by. Her foot was more comfortable the next morning and she could hobble about the villa carefully, although the winding cliff path to the gently shelving beach was beyond her.

On the fourth day Maria looked at her face as she served her breakfast on the sunny patio. 'Today you have a ride,' she said firmly as her sharp gaze took in Nina's pallor and empty eyes. 'Lopaz and me, we show you our Spain. The *senor*, he will be glad for us to take you.'

Nina looked at her miserably. 'Oh, he'd be glad for anyone to take me,' she said softly, her voice heavy with a double meaning that escaped the small housekeeper.

The Mercedes had been returned, so they rode in comfort, and despite her heavy heart Nina had to admit she thoroughly enjoyed the day. The middle-aged couple were inordinately proud of their homeland and were determined to show her its many faces that the average tourist never saw.

They passed ancient stone reminders of where Stone Age inhabitants used to live, the small stone huts dank and cold after the cool Spanish

winter. She marvelled at sheltered fjords and idyllic pine-fringed bays of white sand protected by rocky cliffs, the sparkling azure sea a gently shimmering carpet. After a time Lopaz turned the powerful car inland, where lush pastures and brick- red fields were being worked by black-clad peasants in a manner as old as time, their backs bent in the warm sunshine, whitewashed farmhouses visible in the distance.

'We stop now,' Maria informed her at midday. 'You will eat the *conejo al ajillo*.'

'I will?' asked Nina nervously, waiting with some trepidation for the meal to arrive. She was relieved to find it was nothing more adventurous than rabbit with garlic, served with a delicious creamy mayonnaise and perfectly complemented by the light dry red wine Lopaz had chosen.

The food and wine relaxed her and they spent a couple of hours sitting outside the homely rural tavern, finishing with rich black coffee as thick as syrup, served in tiny heavy glasses. Nina felt the tension flowing from her body in great waves and, shutting her eyes against the glare of the afternoon sun, she leant back against the mellowed old stone wall with a small contented sigh. Maria and Lopaz exchanged a satisfied smile, their brown faces shiny in the heat.

The sun was beginning to throw mauve-blue shadows on the dusty red fields as they drove homewards, passing pretty walled gardens and small white cottages where black-dressed old women gossiped on scrubbed doorsteps, their lined faces suspicious of the big car.

Nina felt pleasantly tired for the first time in days after the long hours in the fresh air and slept deeply, waking refreshed the next morning with her mind more at ease. That lasted until Steed's telephone call in the evening to Maria. She stood waiting in the hall while the little

woman rattled on, and as their conversation drew to a close the housekeeper handed her the phone silently.

'Hello, Steed,' she said nervously. It was the first time she had spoken to him since their last conversation in her bedroom.

'Good evening, Nina.' The cool, deep voice flowed down the line, doing crazy things to her nerves. 'I trust your foot is healing? I understand from Maria that Lopaz is taking you to have the stitches removed tomorrow morning.' There was still that note of careful reserve in his voice that grated on her.

It was clear that their heated conversation in the meadow that day was still to the forefront of his mind; he had erected barriers that she had no experience in dismantling.

'Yes, I can walk OK now.' Why couldn't she think of something to say to let him know that his assumption of her feelings for him was all wrong? She took a deep breath; she had to clear the air.

'Steed, darling, come on.' The female voice in the background was faint but just discernible as she went to speak, and the words of explanation died in her throat. He had a woman there with him! How dared he phone her when he was with someone else? Shock froze the blood in her veins.

'I'm sorry, I seem to be keeping you,' she said coldly as she heard his low muffled voice talking urgently to someone—he obviously had his hand over the receiver.

'That's OK.' His voice was bland and cool: he clearly had no idea he had just torn her heart out by the roots. 'I'm in a restaurant, so it's a little difficult. We've been working all day and decided to finish negotiations over a meal.'

I bet! Nina thought viciously, unknown white-hot needles of jealousy piercing her chest; she would never have believed that love could produce actual physical pain, but she was experiencing it now. 'You had better return to the...others, then, hadn't you?' she said brightly, forcing herself with a strength she never knew she possessed to make her voice light and uncaring. He would never know how much he had hurt her.

'Nina? Are you all right?' Obviously her acting ability wasn't quite as good as she would have liked.

'Me? Oh, yes, I'm fine, absolutely fine. Why shouldn't I be?'

'You tell me.' His voice was irritated now, she could tell, and if she didn't finish this conversation soon the tears that were streaming down her face would sound in her voice.

'See you soon, then.'

'In a couple of days, actually. I phoned to tell Maria to get a room ready for the boys. I'm bringing them out Tuesday.' He hadn't even intended to talk to her, then; she could see it all now. She was so stupid. Her breath caught in her throat and she heard someone laugh shrilly in the background. It certainly wasn't a male who was laughing like that, unless he had severe problems.

'Bye, then.' She put the phone down before he even had time to reply and stood quite still for a moment, her world falling apart around her for the second time in as many months. She had thought the death of her father and the resulting tortuous days of misery were the worst things that had ever happened to her. They were child's play compared to the grief that was twisting her insides into knots now. She should have known. All the signs were there; James had tried to tell her. She brushed the tears angrily from her face with the back of her hand. They had all been right: her father had kept her too

sheltered. She had no weapons at her disposal to fight for her survival in this hard, strange world into which she had been plunged, where all the values and ideals she had learnt since babyhood seemed invalid. A sob caught in her throat. Well, she didn't care. However much she loved him—and she admitted now life would be empty without him—the battle would be won or lost on her terms. She would not compromise her soul.

She had her emotions very much under control by Tuesday when Lopaz drew up in the Mercedes, with Steed's dark head and two smaller ones visible in the back of the car. Her stomach fluttered slightly, but her face was calm and smiling as the door opened and two small dark-haired boys walked slowly on either side of Steed to greet her.

'How do you do?' They spoke in unison with a quick nervous glance at their stern-faced uncle, and held out little thin hands to be shaken.

As she looked down at their strained, tired faces so ridiculously alike, with melting brown eyes and mouths stained from the hours of travel, she knelt down on the warm cobbles and gathered the small, slight bodies into her arms, muttering their names against their heads.

'Hello, you two,' she said warmly. 'I've been longing to meet you.'

For a moment both boys were stiff and unyielding, as though unused to any form of contact, and then they relaxed against her soft shape, their small arms reaching up to hug her neck in a tight grip.

She looked up, her eyes bright with unshed tears, to see Steed looking down at her with a similar expression contorting his handsome features. She smiled weakly, and as the boys' grip lessened, stood up, taking each twin by the hand and drawing them with her into the house.

'Now you must tell me who is who,' she said when they were all seated in the lounge, the bright afternoon sun showing up the unnatural pallor of the childrens' complexions.

'I'm Peter and he's Jason,' said the slightly larger of the two boys, his brown eyes watchful. 'You can tell us apart because I'm two inches taller than him and my hair's curlier.' He had moved protectively closer to his twin as he'd talked, and Nina noticed Jason's small hand slip into that of his brother's. 'He's been ill, but he's better now,' he added firmly, squeezing the thin hand resting in his.

'Yes, I know.' Nina's heart went out to them. 'Your uncle and I thought it would be nice for you both to have a holiday and get to know me at the same time. Is that all right with you?'

They looked at her in amazement, patently surprised at having their opinion asked for. Steed looked equally surprised.

'I suppose so.' Peter spoke again, his face wary. 'How long will it be before you send us away?'

She looked at him intently and spoke carefully, realising intuitively that there was hurt here that no one had recognised. 'We aren't going to send you away, Peter. Uncle Steed will have to go back to work after the holiday, of course, but I shall stay with you all the time. When we've finished our holiday here we will go home to England to a lovely old house by the sea where I grew up. Your uncle has just bought it.' She glanced fleetingly at Steed. 'If you don't want to go back to boarding- school no one is going to make you, I promise.' She avoided looking at Steed now, sensing him stiffening in his chair. 'You can either go to a school near by, where I used to go, or have lessons at home.'

They sat with their mouths wide open, their small faces so shocked and stunned that Nina wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. She did neither.

'Really?' Peter turned to Steed, sitting slightly behind him, for confirmation, his expression frankly disbelieving.

'Nina's in charge,' Steed said drily, his eyes meeting hers. 'What she says goes.'

'Wow!' The two little faces lit up with pure delight. 'No more rotten old Radstowe.'

'I thought you liked your school.' Steed addressed Peter as spokesman. 'You've never complained.'

'We hate it.' The low voice was flat. 'They always tease us because we're small for our age and because we haven't got a proper mum and dad and have to spend some of the holidays at school.' He looked quickly up at his uncle, suddenly realising his last words could be taken as a criticism, his brown eyes apprehensive.

'Well, you've got a proper aunt and uncle now, and that's nearly as good,' Nina said firmly into the silence, sensing that Steed was out of his depth. 'You'll each have your own room and your own toys at Grayfields, and when you want your friends to tea it will be *your* home that you invite them to. Right?' She looked at them gently.

They stared back at her incredulously, looking as though all their Christmases had arrived in one giant parcel.

'Uncle Steed says you are getting married soon.' Peter was already speaking with more confidence. 'Can we come and see?'

'Come and see?' Her voice was playfully chiding. 'He wants you both to be his best men. You are the most important people in his life, so he would hardly leave you out, would he?'

Steed was sitting in what appeared to be a trance, his grey eyes slightly glazed. When the twins ran over to him and flung themselves round his neck he gazed over their brown heads to Nina, his expression comically dumbfounded.

Later that night when the twins were tucked up in the big double bed in the room next to Nina's, their small bodies curled tightly together and their breathing slow and even, she wandered downstairs to find Steed waiting for her, a glass of wine in hand.

'Are they asleep?' His deep voice was gentle.

'Yes, after three stories and a description of every room in Grayfields!' She took the crystal goblet he proffered and gulped at the sparkling white liquid nervously. She suddenly became horribly aware of all the promises she had made to the two small boys without consulting their uncle first. Still, there hadn't been time—it had needed to be done there and then. She raised her chin defiantly at the thought, her blue eyes cloudy.

'Now what's going on in that razor-sharp mind of yours?' He had been looking at her intently. 'Why do I get the familiar feeling that I've done something wrong?'

She looked at him in surprise, a slow flush staining her sun-tinted skin. 'You haven't done anything wrong. I was worried you would think I had.'

'My dear girl,' his voice held that note of labouring patience, 'why should I think that?'

'I didn't ask you whether the twins could leave school or about their being your best men or anything...' she finished haltingly as he gave a small dry laugh, totally lacking in humour.

'Do you really think I would disapprove after seeing such a transformation in them in just a couple of hours in your company,' he asked coldly, 'just because you didn't ask my permission to put their minds at ease? I'm not some sort of dictator, whatever you may think to the contrary, but that's another story.' The full, well- shaped mouth thinned. 'I am more than happy for you to have a free hand with the boys. You clearly understand them far better than I do. I had no idea they were unhappy at school. Besides,' his voice was wry, 'you are the one who will have all the work if they stay at Grayfields.'

'I don't mind that.' Her voice was eager. 'They so need a secure base, Steed. It must have hurt them dreadfully when their parents were killed so suddenly, and they've kept it all in through the years.'

'They had each other.'

'That's not enough; they need other people as well. It's not healthy for them to rely totally on each other. They need adults they are close to and can trust to be there for them, besides friends of their own age. Surely you can see that?'

He smiled slowly, his eyes lazy. 'I can see I made the right choice for them.' Somehow his words saddened her still more. Was that what she was to him? Just a good choice for the children?

She stiffened slightly and put down the half-empty glass with a shaking hand. 'I'm very tired; it's been a long day. Is it all right if I go to bed?'

'Of course it's all right!' The harsh, irritated note was back in his voice. 'You can do what you want, for goodness' sake!'

Oh, but I can't, my love, Nina thought as she wearily climbed the stairs to her room. What I want to do is tell you how much I love you, ask that we have a real marriage and make a proper home for the twins. Instead it will all be play-acting, make-believe. Except for the children. Her thoughts turned to the two little figures curled in sleep. She would at least do her best to make them happy, be everything they needed.

The first blood-curdling scream brought her out of a light, restless sleep with a violent start. She was out of bed in one rapid movement as the next one rent the air with piercing clarity, reaching the boys' room and flicking on the light-switch seconds before Steed threw himself through the door, black stubble standing out in vivid contrast to his shocked white face.

Jason was sitting up in the vast bed, shaking his brother's shoulder, his face fearful, but Peter was still enmeshed in the nightmare, his brown curls wet with perspiration and his face twisted. His dilated eyes held an expression of such dread that Nina's blood ran cold, and she was across the room in a second, gathering the small threshing body in her arms and rocking him back and forth comfortingly while muttering words of endearment against the hot, wet face.

It was a full minute before he relaxed against her, quiet sobs taking over from the frantic gasps that had followed the screams. Steed joined her on the bed, taking Jason on to his lap, their eyes glued to the small body in her arms.

'It's all right, my love, it's all right...' Nina continued to murmur as the small shaking figure in her hold buried his sticky face against her neck. 'It's all over now; just calm down.'

'You won't punish him, will you?' Jason's urgent voice cut into the silence that had fallen on them, punctuated by Peter's gasps. 'He can't help it; he doesn't do it on purpose.'

'What?' Steed's voice was gently questioning. 'Why should we punish him, Jason?'

'Well, Matron at school used to make him write out lines when he had woken the dormitory like tonight. That's why they moved him to the sick-bay with me, but he still used to have the dreams, and then she said he was a baby and he had to have his meals on a little table separate from everyone else.'

Steed's face was blazing with fury, his lips a thin white line, and he carefully put Jason to one side and went to the window with his back towards than. 'What else did she do?' His voice was amazingly controlled.

'Nothing really,' said Jason miserably, looking over to where Nina was still holding his brother tight. 'But when she made him sit on his own the other boys started teasing him all the time, and nobody stopped them. If anyone got into trouble it was always Peter.'

Peter raised his small face to Nina, his long lashes wet with tiny drops of moisture. 'I tried not to go to sleep so it wouldn't happen again, but I got so tired.'

'Of course you did.' She hugged him tightly, her stomach contracting with anger. 'Can you remember what the dreams are about?'

'Yes.' His voice was reluctant. 'It's only ever one dream and it's always the same.'

'Tell me,' she asked coaxingly, stroking the damp hair from his brow.

'It was when Jason was first ill. I'm walking by myself through a sort of desert place with snakes and scorpions everywhere, and there are big black birds that keep swooping at me.'

'Yes?' she encouraged as he wavered, his voice trembling.

'Then Mum and Dad would be on this green grassy hill in front of me and Jason is with them. They're sitting in lots of flowers and Jason is always making a daisy chain. They call me to come and join them, but however much I try I can't get near them. I run and run but I get further away, and then they start laughing and wave goodbye, and I scream and scream at them not to go...' His voice faltered. "That's when I wake up.'

Steed groaned deep in his throat, his back stiff and tense. Nina shot a quick glance at the tall figure as she reached across and gathered Jason in her other arm, hugging both boys to her.

'Look, Peter, would it help if I explained why you have this dream?'

'I think so.' His voice was doubtful.

'It might help you not to dream it if you know what's causing it, you see? You can sort of face it better, bring it out into the open.'

He looked up at her, his face trusting. 'If you think so.'

'Well, when you lost your parents three years ago I expect everyone told you and Jason you had to be brave, didn't they?' He nodded slowly. 'Did you cry much?'

'We did when we were by ourselves,' Jason proffered, 'but most of the time we were with the other boys and they said we were babies if we cried in front of them. Then Matron and some of the teachers said we hadn't got to talk about Mum and Dad because we only got upset.' The sheer insensitivity of the adults in charge of these young minds took Nina's breath away, and she saw Steed clench his fists against the window.

'Now, I know you had to be very grown-up and you were very brave,' Nina continued, 'but when something like that happens and you can't

talk and cry about it it kind of buries itself deep in your mind. It makes you sad even when you're happy.' Both boys nodded vigorously, obviously understanding this strange logic.

'When Jason got poorly you began to worry about him, which is only right,' she said gently, looking at Peter's intent face, 'but instead of being able to let your worry and fear out you had to keep it all hidden again, and that wasn't good for your head.' She tapped the soft curls playfully. 'So your mind cleverly decided to get rid of all that concern by making a play in your head with your parents and Jason and you as actors. You were frightened he would die and leave you too, weren't you?' Peter nodded, his lips shaking. Steed moved restlessly by the window, turning and sitting on an easy chair close by, his dark face grim.

'He is perfectly well again, Peter.' Violet eyes held brown ones in an unwavering grip. 'The illness made him tired and he hasn't grown as quickly as you, but we are going to put all that right. Aren't we, Jason?' Jason nodded enthusiastically. 'Jason is not going to leave you,' she emphasised firmly. 'Uncle Steed and I are not going to leave you. You and Jason are going to be together with us in your own home. You can have a pet too, if you like,' she finished with inspiration. Peter's face broke into a big grin.

Jason looked at her quickly. 'What about me?'

'One for you too,' she agreed softly, tucking the boys under the covers again and stroking their hair from faces so comically alike.

'Now sleep,' she said firmly. 'And if the dream comes again—although it probably won't now you know what's causing it—you can say to yourself, "This is just a stupid dream and it can't hurt me." OK?'

'OK.' She kissed each small face as Steed walked towards the door, his big shoulders hunched.

'Uncle Steed!' Jason's small voice stopped his uncle in mid-stride.

'Yes?' Steed turned and looked towards the three of them, his expression unfathomable.

'You didn't kiss us goodnight.'

'Now, how could I forget that?' Looking inordinately pleased, Steed hugged each child to him, kissing them tenderly as Nina switched off the main light, leaving a small lamp to keep the room in semi-darkness.

'I think we need to have a talk, and if you aren't too tired I'd prefer it to be now, without the kids around.' Steed's voice was abrupt, and Nina looked at him enquiringly, shivering slightly in the cool night air on the wide landing.

'Go and get your robe.' His eyes swept over her and Nina was suddenly embarrassingly aware that all she had on was a wafer-thin silk nightie. Her body gleamed through the soft material with a translucent paleness, and she noticed a small muscle working in his tanned cheek as his eyes met hers.

'Oh!' With a startled exclamation she covered herself with her arms in a protective hug, hot colour flooding her body until her skin glowed, and turned quickly into her room, hearing his low, dry chuckle as the door closed.

'You pig!' she muttered as she shrugged on the fluffy white towelling robe he had bought her in London, pulling the belt unnecessarily tight around her slim body, her movements jerky with humiliation. 'I suppose he thinks I ought to have got dressed before I saw to Peter.'

she said into the empty room. She would have to stop this—she talked to herself far too much when he was around.

Pushing her feet into matching white slippers, she made her way downstairs to where Steed was waiting in the darkened lounge, a single lamp flickering in the corner, casting a desultory glow over his still face.

'That's better—or not, depending, of course, on which way one looks at it,' he said softly, his eyes gleaming in the shadows.

'I'm sorry,' said Nina sharply, her face red. 'The only thing on my mind was Peter.'

'Just as well all reason didn't leave me,' he said drily, and as her eyebrows rose he continued lazily, 'I've never indulged in the English fondness for pyjamas.'

The mental picture that flashed into her mind caused her cheeks to burn and she blessed the concealing darkness in the room. 'Really?' Her voice was carefully bland.

He laughed softly again, walking over to the drinks cabinet and pouring two small measures of *paliofi*, an excellent home-brewed gin he bought locally, topping Nina's glass with a generous measure of orange juice.

'Drink that. I think we both need something to calm us down.'

'Yes, Peter's distress was very upsetting.' She ignored the double meaning heavy in his words.

He sat down with a sigh in one of the chintz easy chairs, his dark face suddenly becoming deadly serious. 'I shall close that damn school. I've never heard of such cruelty.'

'I can imagine there's far worse.'

'Not for a member of my family, there isn't.' He downed his drink in one gulp, fetching the bottle and placing it near his seat. 'Their father was my baby brother, you know. He was only twenty-seven when he died.' He poured another measure, filling the glass this time, and settled back in the chair, stretching out his long, lean legs wearily. 'He wouldn't have believed I could let his sons down so badly.'

'You thought they were happy at school. How could you know?' She meant her words to be comforting, but he wasn't in the mood for consolation.

'I didn't *think* at all. I've been too wrapped up in my own life to worry unduly about them. They seemed OK, and I never delved any deeper, and all the time this has been going on.' He poured himself another drink. 'John was a good man, just a bit too vulnerable for the cut and thrust of this world.' His words were still crystal-clear but the big body was relaxing more in the chair as the alcohol anaesthetised his raw emotions.

'He was more like our mother.' He shot her a quick glance. 'You would have liked *him*.' The inflexion on his words was unmistakable.

'I like you.'

'Sure you do.' He laughed in the back of his throat, his face austere in the lamplight.

'Why do you want to talk to me?'

Her calm tone seemed to draw him out of the self-destructive melancholy, and he straightened in his seat, clasping his large hands between muscled knees.

'I thought Jason was the one with the problems, but it seems Peter is more ill in a different way.' He paused and continued painfully, 'Do you think he needs to see a psychiatrist?'

'No, I do not!' She shot up, spilling the orange liquid in her glass. 'Don't be so ridiculous... he'll be fine. There's no need for that.' Her eyes softened as she took in his tormented face. 'He'll be OK in a few weeks, Steed, you have my word on that. He's on the mend already.'

'You're incredibly comforting.' The grey eyes focused on her soft mouth. 'You're so nice to have around. Why don't we get on, Nina? Why don't you give me a chance?'

She sat mesmerised by this new soft Steed, looking up nervously as he moved to where she sat on the wide flowered sofa. He sat down, pulling her roughly on to his lap as he did so, covering her face with quick hungry kisses before she could move. His lips moved to her throat, gently brushing her ear-lobes until her heart was thudding against her breast and she began to melt against him, wanting his arms to hold her forever. She turned her head so his hard mouth met hers and he growled softly, sensing her submission as she tangled her fingers in his hair. She had so longed to feel his arms round her once more, uncertain after his recent coldness if he cared enough to try again.

'We'll be married soon. Will you let me show you how I can love you then?' His voice was a soft groan as he untied the belt of her robe, gently sliding his hands up the smooth skin of her arms and down over the swell of her breasts, their points hardening at his touch under the thin silk of her nightie.

She knew she would hate herself if she didn't stop this now, but the pleasure of having him close after all the heartache and bitter pain of the last few days was driving all rational thought from her head. He doesn't love you; you're his bought possession, a trinket he'll soon tire

of. The thoughts were thudding in her head but his hard body was warm against hers and his heartbeat was alive and vital under her hand pressed against his chest.

'You're so lovely.' His voice was trembling as he lowered his black head down against her throat, his lips leaving fire wherever they touched. His mouth moved still lower, creating an exquisite need that was threatening to overwhelm her, her limbs shaking uncontrollably against his hard flesh.

'I need you, Nina.' The deep whisper throbbed with emotion. Maybe he could learn to love her? Learn to be content with one woman? She couldn't answer him; his lips were taking her own again in wild, sensuous exploration that made even her fingertips alive with hot feeling.

'Don't...' Her voice was a little whisper against his mouth, lost in the heated sweetness that was consuming her from head to toe. She felt his hands on her body but had lost the will to understand or think any more...

'No!' She caught hold of his hands as they peeled the thin silk from her flesh. 'Don't, Steed, please.'

He raised his head quizzically, his face tender. 'Why not? You know you want me to make love to you.'

'I don't.' She shivered as his hands continued to work their magic, almost swooning under their expert touch.

'You might be telling me one thing, but your body is telling me another.' His eyes were gentle. 'I won't hint you, Nina. Don't you know -?'

She stopped his word! abruptly as she jerked away from his body. 'I said no!' She stumbled shakily to her feet, pulling the robe tightly around her. 'It's got to be more than just a physical thing for me; can't you understand? It might not be the done thing in your world, but I want to know that the man I give myself to loves me, really loves me.'

He went to speak, his face still tender and warm, but she silenced him with a distraught gesture, her eyes swimming with tears. 'We don't love each other, Steed, and I don't want second test. I'd rather have nothing at all than that.' In her agitation she was speaking straight from the heart and her words were stark with honesty. The man staring at her went suddenly grey, as though he had been punched in the stomach.

His eyes turned into cold slits as he stood up slowly, his mouth a thin, tight gash in his pale face. 'I see; then there's nothing more to be said. I promise you I won't inflict my unwelcome attentions on you again. I had no idea they were so distasteful to you.' He waved a hand towards the stairs. 'It will be necessary to cultivate a courteous and believable relationship in front of the boys, and I regret the difficulties that have arisen in that quarter. I did not know your job with them would prove so harrowing.' His words were clipped and formal with a steel edge to them that cut into her heart like a knife.

She raised her eyes momentarily to his face and caught a look of such bitter contempt and agony on the harsh face that it appalled her. What had she said to cause that?

'Go to bed, Nina.' His voice held a dead note, and she escaped from the room in an instant, almost falling up the stairs in her haste to leave the tall dark figure standing so still in the silence.

'Second best.' The words were ground out through clenched teeth.
'Second best!' With a cold, savage violence he threw his glass towards the wall, where it smashed into a thousand glittering pieces.

CHAPTER SIX

SUBDUED laughter and muffled thuds awoke Nina the next day to a room filled with bright sunlight. She had fallen asleep as dawn had crept over the night sky, and her heavy eyes were still red-rimmed from weeping. She lay for a moment, her limbs languid and her mind blissfully numb.

A sudden sharp crash brought her fully awake, and after pulling on her robe she padded next door to the twins' room. A pillow fight had obviously been in progress seconds before her arrival, culminating in a cascade of floating white feathers and a broken picture.

Two pairs of brown eyes watched nervously as she began to pick up the sharp fragments of glass without speaking. 'Sorry, Nina.' They spoke as one.

'You will be by the time you've cleared every single feather from this room,' she said lightly. 'It should take you until breakfast if you work hard,' she added, looking at the small alarm clock on the chest of drawers by the bed, 'and I'd hurry if I were you. It's bacon and eggs this morning. Nine o'clock prompt.'

Their faces were crestfallen but resigned as she left the room, and she heard helpless giggles a few minutes later as she dressed, her own lips curving in response to the infectious sound. They clearly hadn't been crushed by her actions, but she knew it was necessary to set some sort of discipline from the start.

Fifteen minutes later, her golden hair coiled into a French plait, and wearing a white top and shorts, she entered the dining-room, where Steed was already sitting eating breakfast, hidden behind a newspaper.

'Good morning.' She kept her voice neutral as she helped herself from the covered dishes on the long sideboard which stretched down the length of one wall, glad her back was to Steed and he couldn't see her hands trembling.

He answered her briefly, clearly disinclined to talk, and within minutes the noisy arrival of the lively twins broke into the charged atmosphere, dispelling any awkwardness with their excited chatter.

'The boys would like to spend the day on the beach if that is OK with you?' His voice was cool and polite as he left the dining-room and she nodded in agreement, looking deep into his eyes for the first time that morning and seeing nothing in their depths but a remote coldness that sent a chill down her spine.

They spent the day under a huge striped umbrella, Nina alternately dozing and paddling while Steed and the twins swam and explored the myriad small paths leading down from the rugged cliffs. The day was pleasantly warm, the tranquil sea reflecting the azure blue of the clear sky, and the white sandy beach was totally theirs apart from the odd curious bird flapping down in search for crumbs from their picnic lunch.

'This could have been heaven on earth,' Nina murmured to herself as she watched Steed laughingly splashing water on the screaming twins, her face shaded by her hand. As it was, her stomach muscles bunched every time that dark glance flicked her way and nervous tension was causing a painful ache in the back of her head that was getting worse with every passing hour.

She was desperately aware of Steed's powerful bronzed body in the brief swimming trunks he wore, firm muscles rippling under brown skin and tiny drops of water glistening in the tightly curled hair covering his chest. His nearness was a bitter-sweet agony that was driving her mad.

The afternoon sun was casting golden shadows across the pale sand when she was woken from a light doze by Steal flinging himself down beside her under the umbrella, his long legs wet and sandy. 'Come and swim.'

'I don't think so. The water looks freezing.'

He smiled that slow, lazy smile. 'It is, but the twins would love you to—they don't like to be separated from you for long.' His eyes narrowed on her face and there was a strange expression burning in their grey depths.

She shrugged lightly. 'I suppose I could stand a few minutes.'

'Brave girl.' His voice was dry, and she flushed, sensing the criticism it contained. 'They didn't take long to wrap you round their little fingers, did they? I'll have to ask them the secret.'

He was gone before she could reply, running swiftly down the beach like a sleek black panther to join the two small figures waving at the water's edge.

That day set the pattern for the next two weeks. Nina discovered she thoroughly enjoyed the twins' company, and they responded to her affection with an unswerving and immediate devotion that brought many a wry comment from Steed. They were serious, well-behaved little boys, but with a highly developed sense of humour that led them into mischief more than once.

As they grew in confidence so their personalities blossomed, and the two adults discovered they were quite different in many respects. Peter gave the impression of being the leader in their close relationship, but Nina swiftly found that he was more shy and sensitive than his brother, often holding back for fear of ridicule.

Jason, on the other hand, was quite fearless, as his name suggested, and provided the solid support and encouragement his brother so often needed. She found them quite fascinating, and already the warmth of the Spanish climate had tanned their white skin a light brown and brought a healthy colour into pale cheeks.

As their holiday drew to a close Steed explained that on their return to England they would spend a few days in London before travelling down to Cornwall and their new home. 'Nina and I have some arrangements to make,' he told the twins gravely, his eyes cool as they flicked over her still face.

'Oh, no, can't we go straight to Grayfields?' Jason asked disappointedly, and Steed's face settled into its usual austere lines, his expression sardonic.

'We all have to do things we don't like, Jason,' he replied softly to his small nephew, ruffling the dark curls as he turned to Nina. 'Don't we, my dear?' His eyes flashed a message only she understood, and she shivered at the bitter mockery in his face.

London was cold and damp as they stepped off the plane at Heathrow, a chill mist entering the taxi with them and coating the grimy windows, through which the children peered uninterestedly. The warmth and colour of the foreign land they had left three hours before seemed light-years away, and as the boys had one of their rare squabbles, their tired faces mutinous and fretful, Nina realised with a sinking heart that the wedding was only a few weeks away. This was cold reality.

As the taxi ground to a halt at the address Steed had given, its windscreen wipers methodically clearing the thin icy drizzle from the cold glass, Nina realised with alarm that they were outside Steed's London flat. The street lights were shining weakly in the grey dusk, casting a faint glow over the quiet tree-lined avenue.

'We can't all stay her®.' She spoke without thinking, clutching hold of Steed's coat sleeve urgently.

'We can't?' His voice was impersonal and cold. 'Why not?'

She looked at him, her eyes wide with apprehension. He was playing with her like a cat with a mouse. 'You said it only had two bedrooms...'

He smiled caustically. 'Which is why I shall be taking up residence at my club for the duration of your stay in London. It would be more suitable for the twins to be in an apartment than confined to a hotel room.'

She relaxed, a faint pink staining her cheeks.

'That meets with your approval?' The words were cutting.

He took her arm as they ushered the twins through the wide swing doors into the large air-conditioned lobby beyond, nodding briefly to the security guard on duty. 'Hi, Jim. No problems?'

'None, Mr Charlton.' The middle-aged man snapped to attention as though on inspection. 'Your apartment is all ready, sir. The groceries you ordered have been delivered, and Mrs Pearce has been in all morning to see to things.'

'Thanks, Jim.'

As the carpeted lift took them swiftly upstairs Steed looked at her beneath his black lashes, his eyes mocking. 'I trust it's OK if I stay long enough to see the boys settled?' She flushed miserably and he turned away, his eyes hard.

As the lift doors slid open her eyes widened in amazement. The wide hushed corridor screamed elegance, the deep-piled white carpet and

champagne walls talking pure luxury. Even the twins were awed, their shrill voices dying to a murmur as their feet sank into the soft, thick wool.

Inside the flat the rooms were large and fashionably furnished, if somewhat impersonal. It had two enormous bedrooms, a huge reception-room with a quiet tasteful colour scheme in gold and cream, a small study, crammed full with official-looking papers and books, and a luxuriously fitted pale grey kitchen and bathroom. The overall effect was one of understated opulence.

'You'd better sleep in my room,' Steed told her, opening a door to reveal pale oak fitted wardrobes and a magnificent four-poster bed covered with black sheets. She glanced at him in dismay. His powerful presence was stamped all over the vitally masculine room, a small oak desk in the corner holding all his personal toiletries, perfuming the still air with the expensive aftershave peculiar to him.

He caught the look but said nothing, showing the twins the other bedroom, holding two large three-quarter beds with a panoramic view from the large picture window of a silent London shrouded in thick mist.

'I would have thought you would have preferred this room,' Nina commented absently as she peered through the window. 'The view is wonderful.'

'As I'm sure you are aware, I am usually otherwise occupied in the early hours.' The huge bed swam into her vision and she turned sharply away from his taunting gaze, almost knocking Jason over in her haste to escape. 'I might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb,' Steed commented into the air, his face bland. 'If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.' She feigned deafness.

After the twins had bathed and changed into their pyjamas, looking impossibly angelic with big brown eyes drooping in tiredness and damp curls plastered tight to their heads, Nina prepared them a sandwich and a glass of milk, which they consumed in record speed.

'I've sent out for a meal for us,' Steed said quietly when she rejoined him in the lounge after settling the twins in their room. They had been asleep almost as their heads touched the pillows, thick lashes curled on warm, flushed skin.

'That would be lovely,' Nina murmured gratefully, suddenly realising how exhausted she felt. There was a dull throb in the old wound on her foot, and a stiffening in the back of her neck that spoke of an approaching headache.

'Come and have a drink and unwind,' Steed offered, pouring pale cream sherry into a crystal glass and gesturing to the deep-cushioned sofa beside him. She looked at him uncertainly; there were times like now when he was enigmatically foreign, the mixture of Spanish and American cultures producing a dark attractiveness that made her skin tingle.

'I'm not going to eat you,' he said irritably, noting her hesitation, 'but we need to go over the wedding lists tonight, and you'll need something to fortify you, believe me.'

They spent the next half-hour discussing mundane details until the delivery man rang the doorbell, loaded down with bulging carrier-bags. 'Good grief, Steed, there's enough here for an army,' Nina commented after the young lad had left, his eyes wide at the generous tip Steed had given him. She tipped the contents of the foil dishes on to the plates that had been warming, and Steed carried them over to the huge coffee-table he had pulled in front of the settee by the fire. 'It's cosier than the dining table,' he said briefly as he caught her eyes.

'It looks wonderful,' Nina smiled, her breath catching as he turned away swiftly as though fearing the intimacy of the moment. The plates were steaming with the delicious aroma of Chinese food, and by the time they had eaten their fill there was very little left.

'I'd better be going.' Steed stretched as he stood up, his long, lean body uncoiling with natural animal grace, and he smiled a casual farewell as he shrugged into his big, heavy overcoat. 'I've arranged a sitter for the twins tomorrow,' he informed her as he walked towards the door. 'Get a good night's sleep because we've got quite a schedule over the next few days.'

It was a typical male understatement. In between dashes to the office and long, often irate, telephone calls to his business colleagues, Steed kept to a relentless timetable which astounded and exhausted Nina, but at the end of five days all the wedding arrangements were complete.

She was thrilled with her dress, a soft, frothy creation in ivory silk, the bodice covered with tiny hand-sewn pearls that were matched on the edge of the filmy lace veil and again on the skirt, where it flounced at the hem and was caught with tiny pale-pink bows. Steed had given her a free rein in choosing her finery, dropping her at the wildly exclusive salon first thing in the morning and picking her up at lunchtime. She had been childishly adamant that he couldn't see the wedding dress before the marriage and he had indulgently conceded, his cold face slightly amused at her vehemence.

They drove down to Grayfields on the Sunday morning in the inevitable fine damp drizzle that had persisted since their arrival back in England, but after stopping for lunch at a small country inn Nina was pleased to see a weak yellow sun breaking through the dove-grey clouds. She wanted the twins' first sight of her beloved home to be in the best possible circumstances.

'Don't worry, they'll Jove it.' Steed clasped her hand for a brief moment in a tiny gesture of comfort as they neared home, reading her anxious face accurately.

'I hope so,' she whispered back, touched at the spontaneous action. It was the first time he had touched her voluntarily since the twins' first night in Spain.

'How could they fail to?' he answered simply. 'It's got you written all over it.' She looked at him quickly, but the hard face was closed and shuttered against her eyes.

They reached the small sleepy village that held so many precious childhood memories by mid-afternoon, the slate roofs of the old stone cottages in the main street dark against the blue-grey sky. The narrow winding lane that led on to Grayfields was full of large, deep puddles and sharp, jutting rocks, but the big car negotiated the obstacles with consummate ease, disdainfully picking its way upwards into the clear Cornish air.

The twins were immediately enchanted with Grayfields, running madly through every room and calling shrilly to each other with every new discovery. The pleasure Nina got from their rapturous approval was spoilt by Steed's obvious impatience to leave within minutes of their arrival.

Since her adamant refusal of him he had firmly kept her at arm's length, his dark face polite but remote, showing a marked lack of interest in her company. It was humiliating to recognise that he was regretting his involvement in her life, but she had slowly come to the conclusion that his brief desire for her had vanished, leaving him impersonally friendly and gently courteous.

'Can't you stay for tea?' she asked stiffly after he had carried the mountain of luggage through to various rooms, staggering under the

weight of the boxes of toys and games they had purchased for the twins.

'Do you want me to?' He looked down at her, his face serious.

'Of course I do. There'll only be the boys to talk to once you've gone, and it will be two weeks before you come down again, won't it?'

The strangely expectant look died in his eyes as he smiled wryly. 'I see. Any port in a storm. Yes, Nina, I'll stay for tea, but I must leave immediately afterwards. There's an important meeting tomorrow morning that I need to prepare for.'

She looked at him uncertainly. 'Well, if you want to go now...'

'I said I'll stay.' He gave a bark of laughter. 'As you so rightly reminded me, I shan't be down for another two weeks.' His voice sounded bitter and she got the impression she had offended him somehow, but couldn't think how. It had been his suggestion that he concentrate on business commitments over the next few weeks in order to enjoy a month's honeymoon after the wedding.

His grey eyes searched her small face intently, seeming to seek something in the violet depths of hers, and after a long moment he turned away with a weary sigh. 'You'll have time to show me the grounds again before tea. I shall be living here some of the time in a few weeks, so I suppose I ought to become familiar with them.' He sounded as if he didn't really care one way or the other.

'I'll call the boys.' As she moved to the door she froze in her tracks, his deep voice a snarl in the quiet of the room.

'Can't you do anything without them?' Shock made her face white as she turned to face him, and he came towards her like a menacing jungle beast, his eyes bright and glittering in his angry face. 'You

would try the patience of a saint and, as, I'm sure you are aware, I'm no saint.' He was taut with rage and she looked at him in bewilderment, her wide eyes fastened on his.

'For crying out loud, don't look at me like that.' As he spoke his body relaxed, and he ran his hand distractedly through his hair. 'I'm sorry, Nina. We're both under a lot of strain and it's beginning to tell. Forget it.'

Taking her arm, he walked out into the panelled hall, calling the boys sharply, his face grim. She had the impression he was keeping his temper in check with iron resolve, and stood quietly at his side, her face troubled.

Peter bounded down the stairs like a young gazelle, closely followed by Jason, and the next hour was spent showing them the gardens and high cliff walks, the wild sea-swept beach and harsh coastline.

'Nina?' They were sitting in uncomfortable silence in a sheltered spot on the deserted beach underneath the overhanging cliff, watching the twins, close to the water's edge, exploring the myriad small rock-pools the retreating sea was uncovering.

'Yes?' She turned to look him full in the face as she spoke, surprising a curiously vulnerable softness in the grey eyes as they looked at her, which was gone in an instant.

'It's not too late to change your mind.' His voice was flat. 'It's not really working out, is it?' He held up his hand as she went to reply. 'I know you aren't happy. How much that is due to your father's death I don't know. He was a good man, far too good to find himself with a wife like Isobel.'

She moved restlessly, her heart exploding with pain. It was true, then. He wanted to get rid of her.

'Don't worry about Grayfields.' His voice was sombre. 'I'll make it over to you legally. I owe that to Tom's memory. The same applies to the debts; you can forget about them. I would have cleared them for him when he was alive if he had let me.'

Jason gave a sudden shriek of laughter as Peter stepped unheeding into a small, deep hole filled with icy salty water, losing his balance and almost disappearing under the little crested waves as he hopped madly from foot to foot, trying to empty his rubber boots of cold liquid.

'What about them?' Her voice was numb. 'We can't let them down after all our promises.' Hot humiliation swept through her as she spoke and she let the golden fall of hair swing over her face, her eyes burning.

'They're young. They'll get over it.' She glimpsed a glimmer of uncertainty in the cold voice.

'They won't.' With tremendous effort she kept her voice calm. He mustn't suspect he was tearing her apart. 'We owe it to the boys to go through with the wedding as arranged. You don't have to live here afterwards.'

'Don't be ridiculous.' His voice was angry. 'If we do it we do it properly. If the whole point of this sacrifice is to make a home for the twins that's what we shall have to do.'

He looked on their marriage as a sacrifice. The pain and misery she had suffered in the past was nothing to the hot agony that rent her body now. The hope she had cherished that he would learn to love her in the years ahead turned to ashes in her heart, and she was suddenly overwhelmed with the desire to hurt him, to drag her nails over the calm, handsome face and to feel the blood run sticky under her fingers. She balled her hands into her pockets swiftly, horrified at

the primitive animal instinct to attack and destroy. What was happening to her?

'That was the original plan, wasn't it?' Her voice sounded amazingly normal.

'Yes,' he agreed wearily, his voice a sigh, 'that was the original plan.'

A wailing scream followed by . a huge splash announced the end of the conversation, and as Nina rushed to lift Peter out of the surprisingly deep rock-pool he had fallen into she didn't know if she blessed the appearance of the two small boys in her life or resented it. One thing was certain: but for their presence in their uncle's life her own destiny would have been very different. She would have been struggling under a mountain of debts and very possibly homeless, but her heart would have been her own.

Later that night, when Steed had driven off into the darkness, his stony face a harsh mask, she stood for hours in the huge studio at the top of the house, staring out of the windows into the swirling windy blackness. The bare old oak trees groaned and howled in the gale, wildly thrashing their outstretched branches, and somewhere in the distance a lonely melancholy owl called to the moon, its white light hidden behind scudding grey clouds.

A sick weariness gripped her bruised mind as his stiff, hard words ran through her aching head again: 'a sacrifice'. Well, a sacrifice it would be on both sides. He would be forced to spend time with her and his nephews in this crumbling old house far from the bright lights, and she would have to wave him goodbye each time he left without betraying the fact that he was taking a little bit of her heart with him. But she would be his wife. A quiver shook her slight frame as the thought darted into her mind, and she hugged her arms tightly round her body, the chill of the night creeping into her bones. And she still had Grayfields.

The next morning a small hand shook her gently awake to a room filled with bright sunlight. 'We've brought your breakfast.' Two endearing identical faces looked earnestly into her sleepy eyes as she blinked awake, her head muzzy. 'There's cereal and toast, and we made some coffee. We did it all ourselves,' Peter finished proudly, his head on one side like that of a satisfied parrot.

'It took us ages to find everything,' Jason added, his brown eyes alight. 'It's an enormous kitchen, isn't it?'

'Gigantic!' Nina agreed lightly as she steadied the loaded tray on her knees. There was a mountain of heavily buttered toast, which the twins were eyeing expectantly, swiftly joining her on the bed as she patted the coverlet and demolishing the pile with rapturous enjoyment. Nina leant back and watched them as they ate; already their pinched faces had filled out and the subtle pallor of illness was just a memory on Jason's.

'I do believe you've grown in the last three weeks,' Nina congratulated Jason as the three of them finished eating and the twins prepared to take the empty tray downstairs. He flushed with pleasure and Peter agreed enthusiastically, his face beaming. 'It'll be even harder to tell you apart now,' Nina laughed as they marched to the door. 'No tricks, mind!'

'You always know who we are,' Peter said seriously as he opened the door for his brother, his large eyes intent on her face. 'Mum always knew too.'

His words left a warm glow that remained all day. The twins had a wonderful time exploring every nook and cranny of the rambling old house, unpacking the numerous boxes filled with toys and games and arranging them in the large sunny room they had chosen as their playroom. They had decided to share a bedroom rather than separate,

so Nina gave them the huge room next to their playroom which had an interconnecting door and *en suite* bathroom.

Late afternoon, hot, dusty and tired, she introduced them to her father's studio, the aching void his death had caused beginning to close slightly as she drew comfort from the twins' affection. They wandered slowly around the massive room smelling of turpentine and paint, fingering the stacked canvases and rolls of paper, the countless tubes of paint and stained easels.

'Do you think I could do some painting?' Peter asked hesitantly, his voice diffident.

'Of course you can,' Nina agreed immediately, looking at his bent head sharply. 'Do you like art?'

'He loves it,' Jason volunteered. 'He used to do some smashing drawings at school before I got ill.'

'Would you like to paint too?' Nina asked Jason, but he shook his brown curls firmly.

'No, thanks. It's boring. I'd rather read, if that's all right.'

The next few days settled themselves into a comfortable pattern. Peter was a surprisingly gifted artist, having an acute eye for detail that Nina envied. While Jason read contentedly curled up in an easy chair in a corner by the window, Nina and Peter worked silently behind their easels, conferring occasionally over their palettes as they mixed colours.

The twins were thrilled with the quick portraits she did of them one rainy afternoon at the end of the first week, pinning the charcoal drawings over their beds proudly. She had drawn as she always did, using her heart as well as her eyes, and consequently the boys'

portraits were subtly different, the turn of a head and a fleeting expression making them two distinct individuals.

'You're really very good,' Peter said consideringly that evening as she cleaned her brushes in the deep old sink at the back of the studio. 'You could sell some of your work, you know.'

She hugged him tightly. 'Not yet, Peter, but perhaps one day. I'm not good enough yet.'

'Well, I think you're great,' he replied staunchly, his face earnest. 'Can you teach me?'

'Of course, but you've already got something no amount of technique can improve upon,' Nina said gently, looking down into the small face lifted up to her. 'You've got a real talent, Peter. It would be a pleasure to teach you.'

His face flushed with pleasure and his skinny arms clasped her waist in a swift hug before he ran off to find Jason. She knew a piercing moment of heart-wrenching love for the two small pieces of humanity given into her care, and her thoughts turned immediately to Steed, wishing she could share this time with him. His harsh face flashed into her mind and her breath caught raggedly in her throat. In spite of the twins' companionship, the week had seemed endless, and it would be another seven days before she saw him again.

Later that evening, as the three of them sat at the kitchen table eating the delicious beef casserole that Mrs Finch had prepared earlier, she heard the scrunch of footsteps outside the window seconds before Steed's dark head appeared silhouetted against the light from the house.

'Steed!' In her haste to rise she almost knocked over the large earthenware pot that was Mrs Finch's pride and joy, and as she

steadied it Peter and Jason leapt to the kitchen door, sliding the bolt and springing at their uncle's tall, lean form like two baby monkeys.

'Hey, hey!' As the familiar deep voice grated in the darkness Nina's heart did a double somersault, and she licked suddenly dry lips nervously. He appeared in the doorway with the boys balanced on either hip, his powerful body encased in tightly fitting jeans and a cream leather jacket, black hair ruffled by the icy wind. 'Hi.' His voice was laconic, grey eyes lazy and cool.

Nina felt a sudden sharp stab of anger that he should be so unaffected at seeing her, while she was shaken and trembling, and her voice was unintentionally cool as she returned his greeting, her head downcast.

He sat down at the table without a word, catching her eyes silently, the excited chatter of the twins paling into the background as their linked glance held and deepened, desire flashing between them like a bolt of lightning. His strong, sensual face filled her mind and took over her senses until she wrenched her eyes away with a small whimper of panic, covering the sound in a flurry of movement as she fetched a warmed plate from the huge old stove.

'I didn't think you were coming down this weekend,' she said hoarsely, her breath catching in her throat, ladling the rich meaty stew on to his plate until his firm warm hand covered hers, holding the spoon.

'That's enough, thanks.' His voice was rich with amusement. 'I didn't bring an army with me.'

She flushed as he stared at her, his burning gaze travelling over the slender body, taking in the paint-smeared smock and softly ruffled hair. 'I'm sorry I look such a mess,' she said weakly, pushing back her heavy fall of hair nervously. 'If I'd known you were coming -'

'You would have changed and been neat and tidy to welcome the weekend guest,' he finished brusquely, his jaw tightening.

'I didn't mean it like that,' she said slowly. 'It's just that we've been working all day and I feel so sticky and dirty.'

His face softened. 'You've been up in the studio?'

'We all have.' The twins had decided they had been out of the conversation long enough. 'I've been reading, and Peter and Nina have done some painting,' Jason continued. 'They're pretty good really,' he added reflectively, bringing a quick smile to Steed's face.

'I'm glad they meet your high standards,' he said drily, softening his words with a warm grin at his small nephew.

'Is there anything wrong?' Nina asked as he finished his meal with the twins. His sudden arrival had taken away her appetite and she had merely moved her food round on her plate.

'Does there have to be anything wrong for me to spend some time with you all?' His expression was taciturn. He seemed intent on misunderstanding everything she said, his sharp eyes on her full plate as she carried the dishes to the sink after sending the twins to get ready for bed.

'No, of course not.' She kept her back to him as she spoke. 'The twins have settled in fine,' she added brightly. 'I think they feel it's their home now. Of course, we can't replace their mother and father, but I think they'll learn to love us in time.'

The silence was deafening and she turned to see if he had left. He was looking at her with that strange expression in his eyes, turned as if to stone. 'Love is a strange thing.' He shook his head slightly. 'It's frightening to be in its clutches.'

She stared at him, not knowing how to respond. 'Have you ever been in love?' The words left her mouth against her better judgement, a small knife twisting in her ribs.

'Once.' His voice was grim.

'What happened?'

'I'd rather not discuss it,' he said thickly, a dark flush staining his brown skin as he stretched his long legs restlessly under the kitchen table.

'You aren't still in love, are you?' Nina asked recklessly with a note of horror in her voice. Why hadn't she considered that possibility before? How could she have been so blind? There was clearly someone else; it was written all over his dark face.

Steed swore violently under his breath as he noticed the shocked amazement on her face, moving swiftly to her side in one fluid movement. 'Is your opinion of me so low that you imagine I can't love?' His voice was a snarl, his teeth gleaming white in his furious face. 'You think I'm some sort of machine, don't you? A robot with no natural feelings or desires.'

'No.' She tried to back away but he followed her, pinning her against the wall with his long body, his arms outstretched on either side of her slim form.

'Damn you!' The words were ground out through clenched teeth. 'For some reason you branded me as untouchable the first time we met and it's been the same ever since. Well, I bleed when I'm cut and I feel pain. I've been in love. I've loved so badly that it's torn me apart night after night until I thought I would lose my mind.' His voice lowered to a husky murmur, his face stark with loss. 'But you can't get it out of your system that easily.' He was talking as if to himself

now, his voice hoarse with longing. 'It eats away at you minute by minute, hour by hour, and somehow you learn to live with pain. You get by.'

'Steed.' Her soft murmur focused his haunted eyes back on to her white face and he jerked away, his body rigid.

'I hope by all that's holy that you never love like that.' His voice was bitter and strangely defeated. 'I wish you were right, Nina; I wish I were just a shell.'

'I never said...' Her voice trailed away before the savagery in his eyes.

'Get out of here now, before I do something we'll both regret.'

'Please, Steed, you must let me explain. I didn't mean -'

'You didn't mean? But you never mean, do you? One minute I feel you're playing some sort of game with me, and then I look into those damn great eyes of yours and I don't know where I am.'

'I'm not playing games.' Her voice was a whisper.

'Maybe it would be better if you woe,' he said wearily. 'I feel you're like a chameleon; I start to get a little close and you change again. Or maybe a will-o'-the-wisp would be a better description,' he added thickly, lifting up a tendril of pale golden hair and letting it slip silkily through his fingers.

She shivered, her face wary. What did he want from her? He had as good as told her there was someone else- how did he expect her to act? She watched his dark face come closer, his large hands reaching up into the shining mass of her hair and tightening either side of her pale face.

'I want to brand you as mine, do you know that?' he muttered huskily. 'To clothe you from head to foot in veils so no other man can look at you, to keep you wholly to myself.'

She listened, mesmerised, his glittering eyes boring into hers until his mouth clamped down in cruel subjection. She jerked her head away violently, catching him by surprise. 'I'm not your possession, Steed. I'm me; I'm a person.'

His face changed, grim anger replacing the passion. 'I sure as hell know that.'

'You act as though you've bought me,' she whispered unsteadily, a pleading note in her voice.

'Well, haven't I?' he asked cruelly, his face tightening. 'You asked me once what was in this deal for me. Perhaps I've changed my mind about that.' His mouth was drawn back in a bitter sneer and his eyes were like slate; his whole body seemed poised to pounce.

She stared at him in anguish. What was driving him to make him so devilish?

'Stop looking at me like that. Can't you look at me as if I'm a normal man for once?' His voice was shaking with rage and some other emotion she couldn't place. She went to turn away, sick at heart, but he pulled her forward roughly, his grip bruising her arms, until her body was against his hard chest. She made no effort to escape; her mind felt dull and her limbs dead.

'I want you, you know that.' He lowered his mouth and claimed her lips again, crushing her against his muscular body until she could hardly breathe.

She wrenched her face away from his, horrified to find her treacherous body responding to his nearness in spite of all he had said. 'Don't...' It was a faint whisper.

'Why?' There was granite in his voice. 'You know you want me. I can at least awaken that sleeping body.'

She flushed painfully, her eyes wild. 'Animals mate with more tenderness.'

It was as though she had thrown cold water over him. He pushed her away so sharply that she stumbled and would have fallen but for the dresser behind her. There was a look on his face of such deep hurt that for a moment she wondered if she had misunderstood all that had gone before. But no, he had made it plain he desired her body, nothing more.

'There are times, Nina, when I regret the day I ever saw you.' He slammed the kitchen door viciously as he left to go upstairs, the sound jarring her bones until she felt she would break into a million tiny pieces, hot tears running in a flood down her cheeks, and an agony in her heart that was tearing her in two.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'GOOD morning.' Nina opened dazed eyes to find Steed standing by her bed with a cup of tea in his hand and a slightly apologetic expression on his arrogant face.

'Good morning,' she answered softly, looking at him uncertainly as she pulled the bedclothes more tightly round her.

'Did you sleep well?' His voice was uncomfortable, and as she returned his gaze, his face eloquent, he flushed slightly and handed her the steaming cup. 'If it's any consolation, neither did I.'

'It isn't,' she answered simply with the ghost of a smile.

'I'm sorry about last night, Nina.' He walked over to the window, where he stood gazing out into the garden below with his back to her, the sunlight turning his black hair midnight-blue. 'Believe it or not, I have a reputation for my ability never to lose my cool. It's one of my greatest assets in business, but somehow, where you are concerned...' He paused. 'You always seem to manage to hit the fire button.'

'I do?'

'You do,' he said grimly, swinging round and walking over to the bed. 'Nevertheless the fault last night was completely mine and I wouldn't like it to spoil the weekend for everyone concerned. The twins are like cats on a hot tin roof as it is. Can we start again?'

'Of course,' she said immediately, and as his mouth softened into a smile she added hesitantly, 'I'm sorry too, Steed. You have done so much for me and I am grateful, even if it doesn't seem like it.'

'Don't be grateful.' His voice was firm. 'Whatever you do, don't be grateful—that would be the last straw. I only ever do what I want to.'

'I'm not sure if I believe that.'

'Believe it,' he said adamantly. 'You owe me absolutely nothing, if that's the thought that was running through your beautiful head. Your agreement to take the twins on has more than paid the debt in full. We are equal, Nina. We can meet on equal terms.'

She looked up at him, her eyes misty in the early-morning light, and something in their deep blue depths caused a muscle to jerk convulsively in his tanned cheek. 'Hell, Nina, don't look at me like that, not when it's not for real.'

He was gone before she could reply, and as she sat quietly drinking the tea she could hear the twins calling him to their room and wished she had the same freedom. If only things could be different; if only he loved her... She pushed the self-pitying thoughts away sharply. This weekend would not be spoilt. He was here, wasn't he? That was something at least, even if it was probably only to see the twins.

'I wondered if you'd like to come up to London for a meal tonight?' She looked at him in amazement as they sat having breakfast; he spoke about the long journey as though it were a mere five minutes.

'But you've just driven down,' she protested. 'Surely you want a rest?'

'Not particularly.' His eyes were warm as they rested on her wide-eyed face. 'As it happens, some old friends are in London for the night and I've told them a lot about you. They'd like to meet you if you're willing.'

She nodded uncertainly. 'They have just made some important concessions on a particular deal I've been struggling with for some time, so I feel I had to at least ask you. Are you sure?'

She nodded again. 'Of course, if you'd like to. What about the boys, though?'

'Same arrangements as before. You can all stay at the flat and I'll go to my club. Mrs Pearce will be happy to babysit again—she was OK last time, wasn't she? The twins got on well with her, I understand. It'll just be overnight; I can bring you back tomorrow.'

'Fine.' Nina felt the familiar feeling of bemusement creep over her that Steed's lifestyle always managed to produce. He spoke about a four- or five-hour journey in the same way other people discussed a visit to the local supermarket.

The drive up to London was easier than she had expected, the twins' chattering dispelling any embarrassment, although she was vitally aware of Steed's lean body close to hers as he controlled the big car with effortless ease, his large hands resting lightly on the steering-wheel.

She was dreading the evening ahead, although she thought she had managed to keep her fears hidden from him. The prospect of meeting his friends was bad enough, but the fact that they were business colleagues as well caused a nervous fluttering of panic in her stomach every time she considered it. How would she know what to talk about? She was no female tycoon or astute career woman; seeing her in his world, he would realise how totally unsuited she was to become his wife. She sighed deeply; perhaps it was all for the best.

'Don't worry, you'll be fine. I promise I won't let them eat you for the main course.' His hand covered hers for a brief second.

She smiled wanly; she should have known he would sense her unease. 'But do they know that?'

'That's the girl.' He flashed her a quick smile of approval that lit up his cold face so her breath caught shockingly in her throat. 'Don't let it get to you. You're more than a match for anyone I know.'

Later that evening she stared at her reflection in the big oval mirror in Steed's bedroom with something akin to awe. She was wearing a dress Steed had chosen for her on one of their recent shopping sprees, a madly expensive creation in soft silk that she would never have contemplated buying herself.

The style was deceptively simple, its smooth classic lines a perfect setting for her ethereal beauty, the soft gold of the material reflected in her hair, which she had swept up into a loose knot on the top of her head. A single diamond looped on a fine gold chain and her engagement ring were her only jewellery, and the whole impression was one of gentle glowing innocence and radiant beauty. She hardly recognised herself, but the dress had given her the lift she needed to face the evening ahead.

She walked out to answer Steed's knock at the front door as though in a dream, and he caught his breath sharply at his first sight of her, his eyes narrowing as a small flame flared in their dark depths. 'You've never looked lovelier,' he said quietly, putting a small box in her hands as he lightly placed his lips on the top of her head before moving away to sit watching her as she lifted the lid slowly.

'How beautiful,' she breathed, staring at the tiny golden comb covered in fresh flowers of a deep velvet blue.

'To match your eyes,' Steed said as he fixed the comb at the base of her coiled hair. 'Orchids just weren't right somehow.'

'What are the flowers called?' she asked as she raised her eyes to his penetrating gaze.

'Love-in-a-mist,' Steed replied drily, moving to sit on the sofa again. 'Appropriate, do you think?'

"They're gorgeous.' She smiled at him warmly.

'That's not quite what I meant.'

The boisterous arrival of the twins with Mrs Pearce in tow, fresh from choosing a video for the evening from the huge shop a street away, dispelled the question mark that had arisen in Nina's mind at his enigmatic words.

'The things they have in that shop!' Mrs Pearce rolled her grandmotherly eyes in horror. 'They only wanted *The Night of the Living Dead*, a horror movie or some such rubbish! I told 'em, you have *Mary Poppins* or nothing, my lads. I have to go home to an empty flat, and some of those films would scare a body out of her mind!' She turned as she spoke and winked conspiratorially at Nina.

"Thank you, Mrs Pearce,' said Nina gratefully.

'I bought 'em a few sweets to eat while we watch, if that's all right, lovey?' she continued, fetching two enormous bulging paper bags out of her old shopping bag as she spoke.

The twins' eyes lit up and Nina nodded smilingly. The woman really was a treasure. Her handling of the twins was masterly, their lost choice quite forgotten at the sight of those bags.

They arrived half an hour early at the cocktail lounge where they were to meet Steed's friends due to the traffic's being far less congested than Steed had thought. She felt the old panic rise in her throat as Steed ordered two drinks from the attentive waitress. He was so perfectly at home in this environment, while she felt like a very ordinary fish out of water.

'You're going to knock them dead.' His voice was calm and soothing on her tight nerves. 'Just look round you, Nina. Who else do you see who has your natural poise and dignity?'

She looked around and could see quite a few, but a certain intonation in the lazy voice told her he had not said his words lightly. He meant it. He thought she was as good as all these beautiful women who wore their exquisite finery so casually. The thought stiffened her back and put a sparkle into her deep blue eyes.

'I was wondering, would you like me to keep the destination of our honeymoon secret or would you prefer to choose where we go?' At his quiet voice she looked up, startled, from her surreptitious contemplation of a famous actress and her entourage in the middle of the room, to find his eyes on her face.

'I don't know,' she stammered, blushing furiously. 'What do you normally... I mean, what is usual...?'

His face hardened into dark steel even as he spoke, his words deceptively soft. 'Are you asking what I normally do when I take my women away somewhere?' The silk in his voice didn't fool her for a moment. She recognised his anger.

'No, not exactly...' Her voice trailed away. 'It's just I don't know anything about this sort of thing.'

'And I do?'

She looked at him suddenly, her face defiant. 'Well, don't you?'

They glared at each other for a few seconds and then his face softened as he sighed deeply, leaning back in his chair and crossing one muscled leg over another. 'Nina, Nina, Nina. What am I going to do with you?' She held his glance miserably. 'I never pretended I was

a monk, sweetheart, but you seem to rate me between Don Juan and Casanova.' His eyes were dark and glittering as he looked deep into her troubled face. 'Just for the record, I have never taken anyone else on honeymoon before, and although I hate to disappoint that extremely vivid imagination of yours I am not into dirty weekends or "business trips" abroad either. I have to admit that, as I have reached the age of thirty-five without taking a vow of celibacy, there have been ladies who have been more than friends, but you knew that already.' He twisted in his seat and leaned forward again. 'Well, which is it? A surprise, or have you somewhere in mind?'

'No, you choose—a surprise.' A tight sensation was restricting her breathing and she knew she was blushing again but was quite unable to stop the hot colour staining her cheeks. She looked down at her hands resting in her lap, twisting the heavy engagement ring on the third finger of her left hand.

'We aren't taking the twins with us, you know.' Her head shot up in surprise at his words. The thought was entirely new to her and he clearly read her amazement in her wide violet eyes as they searched his face.

'I never thought for a moment we would,' she said indignantly, 'not on our honeymoon.' There was a wealth of shock in her voice and he smiled mockingly, his hand reaching out to enclose one of hers in a soft caress as he turned her fingers over gently in his big palm and stroked the pulse at the base of her wrist with a knowing finger.

'Didn't you? Well, maybe there's hope for me yet, then, but I thought I'd make sure. After all, it won't be the normal sort of honeymoon, will it? Will it?' There was a deep heat in the last words that frightened and thrilled her at the same time. She looked at him wordlessly as every cell in her body quivered in answer to the throbbing need in that dark, rich voice.

'I've dreamed of that time alone with you.' His voice was thick and there was a burning hunger in his narrowed eyes that was met and understood by something deep inside her own flesh.

'Have you?' It was a faint whisper.

'I've thought of nothing else lately; I've eaten, drunk and slept it. Just the two of us together, alone in our private world, with no one to interrupt us, no business commitments, no twins...' His eyes trailed fire over her skin wherever his gaze rested and it was as if he was already making love to her, a shiver of pleasure flooding her body and a flush of desire making her violet eyes liquid.

'Yes, it will be very nice,' she agreed weakly, her voice shaking, disconcerted when he gave a bark of laughter, his eyes wicked.

'Oh, Nina, you're unique! Absolutely unique. I hope the world doesn't change you with its hard cynicism.'

She looked at him under her eyelashes, uncertain if he was mocking her, but there was a wealth of tenderness in the handsome dark face. 'There's a sweet agony in being with you. Have you any idea at all what I'm talking about?' His words were a soft, low growl, and as she nodded slowly his breath shuddered in his throat. 'Let's get out of here now. Go somewhere where we can be alone and talk, just talk. I want to know what's going on in that head of yours.' She looked at him silently, her eyes huge in her flushed face.

'Steed, darling!' The light female voice was familiar somehow, but Nina couldn't place it.

Steed shut his eyes briefly for a second and then opened them to look at Nina with a sigh of resignation. 'Marcia, Paul. Nice to see you. I don't think you've met Nina before.' He turned and rose as he spoke, swiftly pulling out a chair for the slim, beautifully dressed woman

who had just reached their sides and shaking her tall smiling husband by the hand.

'We might not have met you before, but I feel we know you already,' Marcia said warmly as she took Nina's hand in a firm clasp, dropping a light kiss on her cheek. 'Steed has talked of little else over the last few weeks. I feel this last contract would have been more difficult if he hadn't got his heart set on getting back to you as soon as he could.'

'Marcia!' Her husband was laughing but his expression carried a warning as he looked at his beaming wife. He had noticed the slight tightening of his friend's firm mouth.

'It's true!' She spared him a swift glance and then turned back to Nina, her brown eyes merry. 'We have never received so many concessions on delivery dates and distribution before. Normally Steed is a hard man to deal with, even if we have been friends for years. I've been dying to meet you.' She smiled in unaffected friendship. 'I can see why he's so captivated—you're everything he said and more.'

'Marcia.' This time the note in her husband's voice made contact and Marcia tossed her dark glossy curls as, introductions completed, the men seated themselves after ordering another round of drinks.

By the time they wandered through to the quiet sumptuous restaurant half an hour later Nina's head was spinning with the effort of following Marcia's quick tongue. She barely noticed the grandeur of her surroundings as Marcia related one witty anecdote after another, often directed against the fast sophisticated world in which they lived, always careful to draw Nina into the conversation and explain anything that could be misunderstood. The two men were clearly used to her volatile enthusiasm, indulgently putting in a word here and there but leaving the thrust of the conversation to the beautiful brunette.

They had just ordered coffee after their excellent meal and were sitting chatting quietly when Marcia turned to Nina with a quick gesture of apology. 'Oh, I meant to ask your forgiveness for my blunder the other day.' Her face was wry. 'As you have no doubt gathered from this evening, I do have a tendency for rushing in where angels fear to tread.'

'And how!' Her husband's voice was a groan of agreement and she flashed him a quick laughing grimace before turning back to Nina, who was looking at her, puzzled.

'I'm sorry, Marcia. I don't know what you mean.'

'When Steed phoned you the other week, you know.' She flicked Nina's arm lightly. 'I had no idea he was calling you. I thought it was the office yet again, and we had been working all day on the contract and had gone out for something to eat. We were all starving.'

'It was you!' Nina suddenly recognised where she had heard the laughing warm voice before. It was the day Steed had called from England before he had brought the twins out to Spain.

'Afraid so.' Marcia pulled a face. 'I bet you thought he was badgered by business all the time. Can't even make a telephone call in peace.'

'No, not at all.' Nina spoke without thinking, unaware of a lull in the men's conversation and Steed's eyes tight on her flushed face. 'I'm glad you told me it was you. I thought...' She stopped suddenly, aware that she couldn't voice what she had thought.

'What did you think?' The gentle loving companion of the evening had vanished, leaving in its place a cold bleak stranger. Steed's eyes were the only live things in his rigid face, glowing with menacing fury. He had half risen from his seat as though unaware of his

surroundings, his burning gaze held fast to Nina's pale face. 'What did you think?' He repeated the words in a low expressionless voice.

'Steed, it's just something Nina's clearly misunderstood.' Marcia was trying to defuse something she didn't understand. 'I'd just told her that -'

'I heard what you said, and my fiancée's reply.' His voice was Arctic-cold, and Marcia cast a helpless glance at her husband, who replied with a shake of his head and a 'what have you done now?' look on his worried face.

'I'm sorry.' Steed stood up slowly, moving round to Nina's chair and pulling it out carefully as he took her arm in a steel grip. 'We're going to have to leave. I'll settle the bill on my way out, Paul.'

'Steed, please... what have I done?' Marcia's voice was frightened and he looked at her briefly, his hand going out to pat her arm reassuringly.

'Nothing, Marcia; you haven't done anything wrong. Relax.' He turned to his friend, who had risen, and held out his hand. 'I'm sorry, Paul, but this can't wait. I've enjoyed the evening.'

Nina made her farewells while Steed settled the bill, her face white and drawn. There was a deathly grimness about his eyes that warned her this was no passing tiff; there was a rage in his face that had gone beyond mere anger.

'Get in the car.' An attentive doorman had brought the car round to the entrance of the hotel and Steed helped her in, tight control in all of his movements. He was as white as a sheet.

He drove without speaking to a dark secluded street, cutting the engine with a swift savage jerk at the keys and turning to her slowly, his eyes gleaming in the dim light from the street lamps.

'Well?' She was almost fainting with fear, her face a white mask in the stillness, but there was no compassion in his taut face as his eyes searched hers. 'I want you to tell me what you thought when I phoned that night. I want it all.' The last words were a bark and she visibly started, her hands going to her mouth. 'I'm waiting, Nina.' The iron voice was relentless.

'I thought...' Her voice quivered, but his face didn't move. 'I thought you were with someone.'

'*I was* with someone.' He was merciless. 'I was with Marcia and her husband.' He stressed the last two words slightly. 'I don't understand. Explain further.' He was going to extract the last drop of blood.

'It sounded as if...' She stopped, and for a moment the stillness was complete. 'I thought you had taken another woman to dinner.' There; it was said. She looked at his face and it was dangerous, his eyes dark and furious and his jaw clenched.

'Let's get this right.' He paused. 'You thought I had made a telephone call to you while I was entertaining another woman for the night? Did this entertainment include the inevitable in your busy little mind?' She stared at him miserably. 'Did it?' There was a pain in his eyes that matched her own.

'It just sounded as if...' She stopped. 'I'm sorry.'

'You're sorry.' His voice was amazingly even and cool. 'You assume that I would insult you by first of all taking another woman out for the evening and maybe into my bed, and follow that up with such a total disregard to your feelings and status as my fiancée that I would

actually telephone you while in her company? Is there nothing you think me incapable of? No depth to which I would not sink?

'You must see how it sounded to me?'

'Not' The word was a whiplash of hate. 'I do not see at all. If a man insulted me the way you have tonight he would not live to see the morning light.'

She was too frightened for tears, panic filling her mind at his implacable fury. She couldn't reach him; it was as though he had been turned into stone. 'I thought something like that wouldn't mean much to you..She was trying to explain, but her faltering words were the last straw in his iron control.

'You dare to say that!' His eyes tore into hers. 'You credit me with all the finer feelings of a cockerel in a farmyard! Have you no idea...?' His voice died as he pulled her violently across the seat into his arms. 'To hell with it! If that is how you see me, why should I bother?' She struggled madly in his arms, conscious that a brake that had been holding him in all their embraces before had suddenly gone.

'You have pushed me too far, Nina. Tonight you become a woman...'
His mouth devoured hers even as she tried to kick and struggle against the big, solid body, and as he felt her resistance he turned her slightly in his arms so now she was lying cushioned between the seat and his body with her legs trapped beneath his and her arms held tightly in a cruel, biting grip. 'There's no escape. I will prove I'm everything you have thought of me.' The throbbing anger and pain in his voice replaced all desire and his kiss was a punishment, a dark, savage, primitive punishment.

'No, please, not like this...' She wrenched her head away as he followed the line of her throat with his lips, and he laughed softly, his breathing harsh.

'But why not? This is what you imagine I like, is it not? A quick, sordid mating with no care or love on either side, a joining together of two bodies in animal passion?'

His lips found hers again as his weight moulded her into the hard outline of his body, his thighs like steel against her softness and his male power obvious against her shape.

She hadn't known she was crying until she felt him suddenly stiffen against her, his hand releasing one of her arms to brush her face with the tips of his fingers. 'I'm going mad.' There was a strained incredulity in his thick husky voice that reached through her fear and terror and brought her eyes up to the wild glitter in his. 'I'm losing my mind.' He released her slowly, taking his weight off her and lifting her shaking body into her own seat, where she curled in a small, crushed heap, drawing the torn silk round her legs where it had caught on the controls of the car.

He reached in his pocket and gently wiped her face with a linen handkerchief, not taking his eyes from hers for a moment. She quivered as his hand touched her face but he continued in his task, reaching over to the back seat and pulling the car rug over and around her, his eyes bleak.

They drove back in silence, and later that night, when Steed had driven Mrs Pearce home and she was alone, she wandered into the twins' room, sitting by the window while they slept and peering through the slatted blind at the bright lights of London. She couldn't sleep, although her mind was numb and beyond thought, her empty eyes watching the cars crawling about below like tiny glowworms as the city went about its business.

Dawn came slowly in a soft pink greyness, a light mist subduing the sharp outlines of the night. Wearily Nina crawled into bed to lie in the warm darkness, waiting for the twins to awake.

She was pale and heavy-eyed when Steed arrived mid-morning to drive them home, his face hollow and cold in the weak sunlight, his eyes hard. His mood intimidated even the twins, who lapsed into an obedient silence as they left the apartment, causing the drive back to be a silent affair. Steed was immersed in his own thoughts and far away from them all; he had withdrawn into himself to the point where Nina felt he was oblivious of her presence, although she was vitally aware of every small movement he made.

'It's been a long weekend.' There was no warmth in the cool grey eyes watching her as they neared the village. 'You'll be glad to get home.' It wasn't a question and Nina didn't reply, his face chilling her blood.

It was mid-afternoon when Steed's Mercedes drew into the tree-lined drive and they saw Grayfields's dark roof illuminated against the mauve-blue sky. The timeless call of a wood-pigeon rang out in the clear air, scented with the first tender blossom from a bent old lilac tree at the side of the house.

Nina breathed in the cool fresh air as she stepped from the car, lifting her face thankfully to the familiar landscape, unaware of the sombre haunted gaze of the still figure behind the wheel.

The twins piled out in a mad scramble of jeans and trainers as soon as Steed cut the engine, disappearing with wild whoops behind the house in a noisy game of tag.

'I won't come in.' His voice was tight, the sound jarring on the soft Cornish air, causing her to turn and meet his dark gaze. 'You are very tired and the twins need to bathe and eat.'

'Can I make you a cup of coffee before you drive back?' Nina offered hesitantly, her stomach twisting as she met his eyes. What a disaster the weekend had been.

'You're very kind.' His mouth twisted mockingly. 'However, we are both aware you can't wait to see the back of me, and I can't say I blame you.'

"That's not true.'

'No?' He sighed deeply. 'You really care for the twins, don't you?' Something in his voice disturbed her further, a strange inflexion she couldn't name. Was he going to take them away from her? Her eyes flared in panic but she kept her voice calm.

'Yes, they're great kids. A credit to you.'

His mouth twisted as though in contempt. 'Let's face facts. If it had been left to me my brother's children would still be struggling in an impossible situation, without their guardian and protector having the faintest idea anything was wrong.'

'It wasn't your fault,' Her voice was gentle as she looked at him through the car window. 'How could you have known? Anyway, you arranged this whole thing for them, didn't you—me, Grayfields, everything? You have nothing to reproach yourself for.'

There was complete silence. 'You really don't see, do you?' His voice was thick. 'You really don't have any concept...?' She stared at him as his voice ground to a halt and his eyes met hers with a deep haunted bitterness in their grey depths. 'We don't speak the same language.'

He turned the key so that the big machine sprang into life, his face weary and his voice hard. 'I think it would be best if I don't come down again until the weekend before the wedding. I shall be busy, and the boys don't need me as long as they have you.' She made an involuntary gesture of denial but he stopped any words with a quick shake of his head. 'I've had all I can take, Nina. I'll be seeing you.'

As she stepped back from the car he ground round her in a scream of burning tyres, roaring down the drive without looking to left or right. She was walking up the crumbling stone steps to go and find the twins when she heard the squeal of laboured brakes, and as she turned the big car was backing furiously towards her in a flurry of silver metal. A cloud of birds rose from their perches in the old trees, calling their shrill disapproval of the crazy behaviour of humans in grating cries.

'Steed?' He was out of the car as she spoke, taking the steps two at a time, pausing before her with an almost satanic expression sharpening the rugged features. His dark masculinity reached out to overpower her, and for a moment she felt breathlessly afraid as his icy grey eyes swept over her slender face.

'I forgot to say goodbye.' He pulled her roughly into his arms before she realised his intention, his grip inexorable.

'Don't.' She gasped in shocked surprise at his abruptness as he stared down at her, his teeth gleaming in a bitter sneer.

'Don't? Don't what? Don't kiss my loving fiancée farewell? Is my touch so repulsive to you? I seem to remember that on other occasions I can get you to forget your inhibitions. That is, of course, when I use a little finesse.' She twisted in his grasp, alarmed by the wild savagery on his face, the cruel compelling line of his jaw as he lowered his ebony head to hers.

She had expected the kiss to be brutal, but as his firm, warm lips parted hers his touch was gentle, probing the intimacy of her mouth in a sweetly passionate need that drew her into his body until she felt as though they were one, so closely were they entwined. He was murmuring incoherently in his throat, his hands stroking her soft body under her coat until she felt hot desire leap into play, catching the breath in her chest and causing her own hands to explore in turn.

He groaned convulsively at her touch, his ragged heartbeat in tune with hers, his lips scorching her flesh as his mouth moved down her face and into the hollow of her throat where the pulse was fluttering like a live thing. Her helpless trembling was feeding his desire and he raised his head shakily, looking down into her flushed face, searching her eyes with a sudden curious longing.

'Nina?' She gazed up at him, lost in a shivering whirlwind of desire. 'Nina.' He shook her slightly, his face torn with a hungry pain, a shadow of self-contempt pulling at his mouth. 'It isn't enough, is it?'

'What?' She could scarcely hear him, but he pushed her away from him slightly so the cold air was icy on her face.

'You are so young, so innocent, so very pliable.' She gazed at him in confused perplexity, her eyes still clouded with passion. 'It would be so easy to take you and damn the consequences, but you would end up hating me more than you do now.' She shuddered, this time with foreboding, and his hand went out to her to stop midway, a groan wrenched from the very heart of him. 'Second best.' He turned away slowly, his big shoulders bent. 'You're right, sweetheart—you deserve better than that.'

This time he didn't come back. As the car disappeared in a swirl of grey dust the night's approaching quietness settled on the garden. A bird twittered briefly in one of the vast oak trees lining the drive, and then all was silent again.

Nina stood quite still, her heart and body frozen. Somewhere behind the house she could hear the twins shouting, but the sound hardly registered as a heavy sick weariness invaded the ice round her heart. In those last few seconds after he had pushed her away his face had been rent by pain, humiliation and a bitter, cold misery so deep that she felt he was drowning. He still loved the other woman that much.

What had he said? She wrinkled her brow as she tried to remember his muttered words; oh, yes: 'It isn't enough'.

'Why, Steed?' she whispered into the cool air. 'Why did you have to come into my life and make me love you? Why couldn't you have just left me alone?'

Later, after the boys were asleep, she sat in quiet reflection on the old stone steps in the dark of the night.

'Help me, Dad,' she prayed into the blackness. 'I need you. I don't know which way to go any more.' As she spoke the night's velvet darkness was lifted into light and the moon sailed out in full splendour from behind dense clouds, shafts of white moonlight illuminating the hushed garden and giving a stark beauty to the tall ancient oak trees, their vast limbs naked and cold, silhouetted against the soft glow of the night sky.

'Nothing worth having comes easy.' Her father's words spoke into her head with sharp clarity, his voice so real in her mind that she almost expected him to be standing by her side. It had been one of his favourite sayings when things went wrong. Steed was worth having. In the past few weeks she had seen so many facets of his personality, each more endearing than the last: his tenderness with the boys, his strength and determination, his intrinsic compassion. Even the lasting love he had for this other woman spoke of his intensity of spirit.

She had been handling this all wrong. How could he begin to care for her as something other than her father's daughter and an attractive woman if she held him at arm's length? She would fight this woman on equal grounds. What did pride or self-preservation matter when her whole future was at stake? Because she suddenly knew one thing with shocking truth: if she couldn't have Steed she would never have anyone else.

'I'll tell him how I feel,' she breathed softly. 'I'll tell him I don't expect anything, that I know he loves someone else but I'll be there for him.' A solitary bat curved down towards her in swift flight, turning at the last moment and disappearing into the motionless trees.

She shivered in the silence. Could she do it? What if he rejected her still further when confronted with her love, with the bonds of commitment he so abhorred? She raised her small chin unconsciously, her eyes gleaming as she looked into the dark future. She had to try. Without him she had nothing.

CHAPTER EIGHT

'I'm so sorry, Miss Kirkton, I'm afraid Mr Charlton still isn't available.' Carol's cool, superior voice didn't sound at all sorry. It was the third time Nina had called and she was beginning to despair that Steed would ever talk to her again.

She had slept surprisingly late that morning after a restless night, tossing and turning into the early hours, going over her proposed conversation with Steed, longing to talk to him now the decision had been made. By the time she had called London Steed had been in conference, and, after ascertaining it wasn't a matter of life or death, Carol had tightly informed her in clipped tones that he had left orders he wasn't to be disturbed.

'Do try later, Miss Kirkton,' she had suggested firmly, and it was now three hours and two more phone calls later, and Nina's teeth gritted in impotent fury. The secretary's voice was just bordering on complacency, her attitude proprietorial.

'I see, Carol.' Nina's voice was as cold as the other girl's. 'Please tell him I rang when he's free, and ask him to call me this evening. I shall be busy for the rest of the day.'

Now why had she been goaded into saying that? Nina thought crossly as she put down the receiver with unnecessary force. Cutting off her nose to spite her face. The afternoon stretched endlessly before her, an animal restlessness pervading her agitated mind. It was the twins' first day at the village school and they had woken her that morning with a goodbye kiss as they had left. She had intended to take them herself and settle them in, and consequently had felt mildly guilty all morning.

After preparing and eating a light lunch she wandered upstairs to the studio. The large room was full of light, and as always the

comforting smell of paint and turpentine soothed and calmed her. All her life she had run to this room with her troubles. It was here she had really got to know her father, their shared interest in art forging bonds that had proved unbreakable in the traumatic years following Isobel's arrival.

A sudden burst of adrenalin fired her senses as she gazed at a half-finished portrait her father had been working on before his death. The laughing face of the young schoolteacher from the village stared back at her, the contours blurred and muted. Her father had been painting from a photograph, which was still propped to one side of the easel, slightly curled at the edges. She remembered vaguely the finished work was to have been a surprise birthday present for his elderly mother.

She worked on the canvas all afternoon, so absorbed that she was unaware of the twins' return until they burst exuberantly into the room in a flurry of cold air and school disinfectant. 'That's very good.' Peter moved his head to one side as he considered the portrait, his face serious.

'Good? It's terrific!' Jason said warmly, his face alive with admiration. 'Why don't you paint a picture of Uncle Steed, Nina? You did one of Peter and me.'

'They aren't pictures, silly,' said Peter condescendingly, giving his brother a light punch on the arm. 'They're called portraits.'

'I don't care what they're called,' Jason returned smartly. 'I know Uncle Steed would like one.' His usual good humour was quite unruffled by his twin's superior air.

'Come and tell me how you got on at school,' Nina interrupted firmly, guiding them out of the room hurriedly, recognising the possibility of an argument. They both spoke at once as they went downstairs, the

big old kitchen enveloping them in its homely warmth as they opened the heavy door, the enticing smell of fresh bread rich in the air.

'Mmmm...' They lifted noses in unison, sniffing madly as she pushed them towards the worn oak table.

'The Bisto twins,' Nina laughed gently, a sudden surge of maternal love lifting her heart as she looked at the flushed, grubby little faces as they devoured great chunks of Mrs Finch's delicious bread.

It was eleven o'clock when Steed finally rang. She had just finished checking the doors and windows prior to going to bed, and was in the kitchen making a cup of cocoa, having long since resigned herself to the fact that he wasn't going to call.

'Hello, Nina, is that you?' She licked dry lips nervously, her stomach fluttering madly.

'Yes, it's me; thank you for calling back.' The sound of his deep, gravelly voice was doing bizarre things to her insides, and in her agitation her voice came out in a breathless squeak.

'Carol left a message to say you wanted to talk to me. When did you ring?'

'This morning.' Three times, she added silently in her head. 'She said you were tied up in conference.'

'Stupid woman!' For a startled moment Nina thought he was referring to her. 'She knew I would be away all day—she had a number where she could reach me. It's only by chance that I called back here tonight to pick up some papers I need to work on.'

'I did say it wasn't important.' Now why am I trying to smooth things over? Nina thought in exasperation.

'Nevertheless, she knows better than that.' From the sharpness of his tone Nina gathered he wasn't to be placated. 'Well, what do you want?' He sounded faintly harassed and extremely tired, and Nina stood staring at the dove-grey wall silently, her mind blank.

'Nina?' His voice was irritable. 'Are you still there?'

'Yes, I'm here,' she stuttered into the receiver, feeling shivers of panic run down her spine. She didn't know where to start.

'Why is it a telephone conversation with you always resembles twenty questions?' His voice was carefully patient, as though talking to a very young child.

She pictured the big, lean body relaxed at his desk, the cold handsome face tight with exhaustion, and felt her breath constrict. 'I don't really know where to start.'

There was a pregnant pause and then, 'I'm not going to like this, right?' Steed asked grimly. 'Does it have anything to do with this weekend?'

'Yes and no,' Nina replied miserably, and heard the sharply indrawn breath on the other end of the line with a beating heart.

'Nina, I've been in a hell of a meeting since eight this morning and we're no nearer to a settlement now. I've got to work half the night preparing some figures and be back in there with all guns firing first thing tomorrow morning. I'm tired, I'm hungry and I need a shower. Now spit it out.'

'I can't discuss it over the phone, Steed; I just can't.' The silence was deafening. Long seconds ticked by.

'Damn you, woman; you'll be the death of me yet,' the deep voice drawled with wry humour. 'Do you mean to tell me you called to say you can't talk to me?'

Nina giggled nervously—he must think she was completely crazy. 'Sort of.'

'Look, sweetheart -' her heart leapt into her throat at the casual endearment '—I've got too many people relying on me to let this deal slip. There are a lot of people's jobs on the line and we need to come out on top. It's maybe going to take another couple of days' intensive negotiating before I can leave. If you need me there now I'll come, but can it wait?'

'Yes, it can wait,' she agreed immediately. 'I don't want you racing down here in the night and then driving back to London.'

'Am I allowed a clue to what this is all about?' he asked abruptly. 'The twins are OK, aren't they?'

'It's nothing to do with the boys,' she replied swiftly, her voice apologetic. 'It's us, Steed. We need to get things straight between us.'

'I see,' he said flatly. 'You sure as hell pick your moments. Are you trying to tell me you don't want to go through with it?'

'No!' The word shot out before she had time to think. 'That's the last thing I'm trying to say.'

'It is?' His voice was thick. 'Well, you've lost me.'

'I hope not.' Her voice was no mote than a whisper and the silence at the other end of the phone was complete. A full minute ticked by and still he didn't speak, although she could hear him breathing. She struggled for words. 'We haven't been honest with each other, Steed, and I can't go on as we are. I want to tell you how I feel and you must

do the same. It won't alter anything, I know; we'll still go ahead with the wedding and everything...' Her voice trailed away.

'It's a dangerous game you're playing.' His voice was husky. 'You might not like what you hear. Better the devil you know...'

'I'll take that chance.' Her voice was firm.

'Will you?' There was dark amusement in his voice. 'I don't know if I want to.'

'Please, Steed.'

'Thursday evening.' He spoke as if pronouncing a death sentence. 'I'll be with you Thursday evening. I'll call before I leave to say what time to expect me.'

'Thank you,' she answered quietly, and heard him mutter something under his breath as he replaced the receiver.

She awoke early the next morning from a deep dreamless sleep to find her mind clear and at peace for the first time in days. She found herself humming quietly as she prepared the twins' breakfast in the sunny kitchen. It was a beautiful spring morning, one of those rare English days when the sweet scent of life was heavy on golden air, a promise of lazy summer days ahead. A slight breeze stirred the flowering honeysuckle hanging precariously over the kitchen window, and a solitary bee droned by on its early quest for nectar. "The drink of the gods," Nina murmured dreamily to herself.

'You're happy this morning,' Mrs Finch beamed approvingly as she bustled in the kitchen door as the twins were leaving in a mad scramble of textbooks, gym kits and packed lunches. 'About time I heard you singing again—I've missed it.'

'Do you need any help?' Nina asked the small woman smilingly. 'If not, I thought I'd work in the studio today.'

'Go on with you,' Mrs Finch replied firmly. 'You know I like my kitchen to myself, Miss Nina. I'll bring you elevenses later.'

As she opened the creaking door to the studio she stood for a moment framed in the doorway, drinking in the familiar objects gilded in the sunlight streaming in through the huge windows. The room was already pleasantly warm, the massive panes of glass acting as giant radiators, and she opened one of the small windows at the side of the room, letting the cool breeze play over her hair, teasing the feather-light tendrils falling round her face.

'Right, Steed,' she muttered to the blank canvas before her. 'I'm going to capture you on paper, even if I can't in the flesh.'

By the time Mrs Finch waddled up the stairs, puffing and blowing, with her coffee and biscuits, the old varnished floorboards were strewn with discarded sketches, and Nina greeted the old woman's entrance with a huge sigh.

'What's the matter, lovey, can't you get it right?' The small daily bent and picked up several pieces of paper, exclaiming in wonder as she flicked them over, revealing Steed's dark face in a number of different views. They were all quite different in expression, but each one captured the vibrant and magnetic quality of the subject.

'I just can't decide which one I want to make a portrait of,' Nina said despairingly, gathering the pencilled sketches into a pile and looking through them again. 'Every time I decide on one something else just springs out.'

'My word, Miss Nina, you've come on,' Mrs Finch murmured admiringly. 'This is your young man, isn't it?' She gave a little shiver

and plumped up her ample bosom with her forearms as she stared at the enigmatic face on the paper in front of her. 'I can see why you've fallen for him,' she continued slowly. 'Like a film star, isn't he?'

Nina smiled indulgently. 'I don't think he would appreciate that description, but I know what you mean,' she agreed.

'You've certainly made him seem alive,' the little woman continued thoughtfully. 'I've never met him, but I feel I know him from all these different pictures. I hope he loves you as much as you do him,' she added as she walked towards the open door.

'What do you mean?' Nina asked, flushing scarlet.

'Oh, don't mind me, Miss Nina,' Mrs Finch chided, seeing her stricken expression, 'you know-how I ramble on. It's just that you've drawn him so... Oh, there, I don't know what the word is.' She closed the door quietly, leaving Nina standing in the middle of the room, dumbfounded.

She riffled through the sketches again, trying in vain to see what the little Cornishwoman had meant. She had drawn Steed as her heart's eye saw him—it was the only way she could work. Her father had always approved her unusual style, but now she wondered if maybe this whole idea was a mistake.

'No,' she said out loud to the big room as she sipped her hot coffee thoughtfully, 'I'm not ashamed of how I feel, and if it comes through in the portrait, well, so be it.' The frown which had wrinkled her brow at Mrs Finch's words cleared as she glanced through the sheets of paper again; it was only Steed's face that stared back up at her.

By mid-afternoon she had put paint to canvas, returning again to the darkened room once the twins were asleep and working on into the early hours, totally absorbed.

She found it surprisingly easy to wake the next morning, dressed and downstairs long before the twins stirred. The warm spell seemed to have ended, and a cold wet mist had stroked its damp tentacles round the house during the night, swathing the garden in heavy moisture and banishing the sun behind heavy grey clouds.

She drove the twins to school in spite of their combined and vehement protests, and a low growl of thunder rolled across the darkening sky as she parked the car in the large double garage at the back of the house.

Following an impulse, she walked across the lawns, the young spring grass wet and slippery underfoot, and followed the narrow path that led through the wild tangle of trailing bushes and stunted trees to emerge on the crumbling cliff path that straggled perilously down to the sea. Far below, menacing dark grey water was hurting foam-crested waves viciously on to the deserted beach, and a few wind-blown despondent seagulls called their lonely haunting cry into the dark void.

'I will get through this.' She sat down on a smooth polished rock, drawing her knees into her chin and gazing into the vast expanse of sky and ocean, revelling in the primitive power the elements were displaying. 'I will make him love me.' The wind snatched her words away, the mystic, savage majesty both thrilling and comforting her, touching some hidden chord deep in her soul that encouraged her to fight.

Eventually the piercingly cold wind chilled her bones through the thick red duffel coat she was wearing, forcing her to stretch stiffly and seek the sanctuary of the house.

Once inside, the call of the studio proved irresistible and, leaving the breakfast dishes soaking in hot soapy water, she hurried to the attic room, looking afresh with critical, probing eyes at the outline she had

begun the day before. 'Not quite the right angle,' she muttered to herself, and after a few moments the room had worked its spell, drawing her into her work until she was totally absorbed. Mrs Finch came and went, the storm spent its fury, but she was blind to everything but the strong dark face taking shape on the canvas.

When the telephone rang she wriggled briefly in annoyance and then glanced at her watch, noting with surprise that the twins would be home soon. Taking the stairs two at a time, she skidded into the shadowed hall in seconds, whisking up the receiver as she jumped the last step and speaking the number breathlessly.

'Nina? Is anything wrong?' Just hearing that voice sent her heart into her mouth.

'I'm just out of breath,' she answered quickly. 'I was painting in the studio and I didn't want the phone to stop.'

'I've finished earlier than I expected,' he said brusquely. 'I can come down tonight if you haven't changed your mind.'

'I haven't changed my mind,' she affirmed quietly, intuitively recognising the tension the abrupt tone was endeavouring to hide. 'Are you sure you feel like driving down after working so hard? The weather isn't too good.'

'Damn the weather.' Nina smiled to herself—that sounded more like Steed. 'You're right, by the way,' he continued.

'I'm right?' He read the confusion in her voice.

'We do need to have a talk. I've been doing some thinking of my own over the last couple of days, and I think you can handle what I want to say.'

'I'm not a child, Steed.' Her voice was reproachful.

She heard a strained chuckle at the end of the line. 'Now that I am aware of, believe me. You're the only woman I've ever met who is a complete and utter puzzle to me in every way, and I don't like it.' His voice softened. 'I want to understand you, and I can't even get to know you.'

Her stomach churned but she forced herself to speak the words in her heart. 'I want you to get to know me, Steed, and I want to understand you, I really do.'

'Do you?' His voice was thick and husky. 'Hell, Nina, why are we having this conversation with half the country separating us? I'm coming down tonight. I'll take the chopper and land on the main lawn.'

'I'll be waiting for you.' There was a small tremor in her voice.

'You will?' She flushed at the question in the velvet tones. 'I wish I could see you now, face to face. There are things I need to know. Do you realise that, in all the time we've known each other, this is the first conversation where you have really talked to me?' There was a faint note of male triumph in his voice. 'I began to think you were never going to let me in; you've no idea what—' His voice stopped suddenly. 'Sorry, don't back off; I'm not going to rush you. It's just that I've been treading on eggshells for so long...'

'Eggshells?' She had the old feeling creep across her that they were talking at cross purposes again.

'Just stay there,' he said. 'Don't move; don't even breathe. I'll be with you as soon as I can.'

She heard the kitchen door flung open and Jason's shrill voice calling seconds before the twins came bursting into the hall. 'I shall have to go, Steed; the boys are home.'

'OK, just make it four for dinner. And Nina...'

'Yes?' she breathed, sensing his hesitation as his voice faltered.

'Remember I told you I'd been in love once?' Did she remember? It had haunted her ever since. 'The girl in question wore a white dress and had fresh flowers in her hair. I'd never seen anything so beautiful in my life. I couldn't take my eyes off her all evening but she was so young, just sixteen, and I frightened her badly. It all went wrong, and although I wrote her a letter to explain and tried to see her again she wouldn't let me near.' The letter he had written on the night of the party—she had ripped it up without reading it!

'What did the letter say?' Her voice was a tiny whisper, but he heard it.

'Didn't you get it?'

'I tore it up. I was feeling so hurt...'

'Don't.' His voice was a groan, and there was a moment of agonised silence. 'It only said I realised that night I had just made the biggest mistake in my life. I humiliated you without meaning to; I just wasn't used to dealing with such innocence. It begged for a second chance and asked your forgiveness. It said...'

'Yes?' Her legs were shaking so much that she could hardly stand.

'I'll tell you when I see you.' His voice was a deep throb. 'There's never been anyone before or since who has remotely touched my heart, Nina.' Something burst inside her with an incredible sweetness. 'I probably shouldn't be telling you now, but things couldn't be much worse than they have been for the last few weeks. I've felt I was going crazy, wanting, loving you so much...' She heard him breathe deeply. 'I'll settle for friendship from you if that's all you can give; I

understand, but I need something...' His voice faltered and the phone went dead as he replaced the receiver at the other end.

'Steed!' She shook the receiver dazedly, unable to believe he had rung off without giving her a chance to reply. 'Steed, you idiot!' She felt suddenly light-headed, a million words cascading around her head causing her ears to throb and her chest to constrict tightly. He loved her! He had always loved her... Why hadn't he told her? But she knew the answer even as her mind posed it. He had thought he would frighten her still further away, and perhaps he would have been right, at the beginning. But what heartache they could have saved each other from.

'Nina?' Jason's small hand touched her arm gently. 'What's the matter?'

She focused her eyes with difficulty on the two small concerned faces in front of her; they kept swimming alarmingly in and out of her line of vision. 'Nothing's the matter—everything's wonderful,' she answered shakily and then promptly burst into a flood of tears, trembling with the force of her relief.

It was the sight of Jason's quivering lower lip and Peter's frightened red face that restored sanity. Gathering the children in her arms, she hugged them close, laughing through her tears as she tried to explain the madness of grown-ups.

'Didn't you know Uncle Steed loves you, then?' asked Peter incredulously, his face stretched in amazement. 'You should have asked me and Jason; we knew.'

She nodded solemnly. 'I'll remember that in the future, but everything is going to be all right now.' She was to remember those words a short while later and wonder what demon had been listening in the quiet of the dying day.

CHAPTER NINE

AN HOUR had ticked by painfully slowly since Steed's call and the twins were feeling the overt pressure as much as Nina. Alternating between sharp bursts of rough play and sulky silences, the tension grew until Nina horrified herself by slapping Jason on his arm and shouting at Peter until the boy's small face was scarlet. Mortified, she pulled them both into her arms again, muttering her apologies and asking their forgiveness.

'Let's go down to the beach,' Jason suggested when calm had been restored over milk and biscuits. "The rain's stopped and it's not so windy.'

Nina looked out of the kitchen window. Angry black clouds were scudding across a wild darkening sky, and the kitchen's soft warmth seemed temptingly cosy.

'I don't think so; it will be dark soon,' she said doubtfully.

'Oh, please, Nina,' Peter begged, adding his plea to his brother's. 'It won't be really dark for ages yet, and the wind is keeping the fog away. You always say the mist is the dangerous thing round here.'

They looked hopefully at her, brown eyes spaniel-like, and she capitulated suddenly, shooing them into thick coats and wellington boots. 'We're only going for a few minutes, mind,' she cautioned them as the boys ran, screaming, past her as she closed the kitchen door. 'Uncle Steed will arrive soon and we must be here to greet him.' Her heart pounded at the thought.

The tide was coming in fast as they reached the big beach of firm sand, the twins immediately disappearing behind a small cove hidden between rocky fingers where three or four of their school-friends were busy fishing in a massive rock-pool. Fierce Atlantic rollers were

crashing tiny pieces of debris up the beach, and Nina wandered along the shoreline, idly sorting shells with the toe of her old beach shoes, breathing in the strong salty air as it whipped her long golden hair into wild disorder.

'He loves me, he loves me,' she said out loud to the wind and sky, the wonder of it causing her heart to palpitate madly. There was nothing stopping them now. She pictured Steed's strong, stern face as she told him what he had longed for years to hear.

A large grey wave swept vigorously up to her feet, causing her to leap backwards with a giggle of surprise. She tinned and looked down the beach, checking on the boys, and was relieved to see they had left the hidden cove and were trailing along behind her, darting here and there as some particular morsel was unearthed by the encroaching sea.

She had lectured them again and again on the dangers of the fast incoming tide in these parts; the shores of Cornwall could be treacherously deceptive with their labyrinths of rocks and caverns. The enchanting rock-pools that were such a delight in the day could swiftly become murky graves by night.

We can be really married now, she thought as she gazed with unseeing eyes at the wind-tossed sea. Have children, make a life together. The thought of Steed as her husband in every sense of the word brought a thrill of pleasure shooting through her body. 'I'm so lucky,' she murmured into the charcoal sky, and it was at that point that the world as she knew it stopped existing.

The first inkling she had that something was terribly wrong was as Peter caught hold of her sleeve, his small face white and panic-stricken.

'Nina, we've been calling and calling!'

'The wind takes the sound away,' she answered automatically, arrested by the horror in his staring eyes. 'What's wrong?'

'It's Mary Finch.' Mrs Finch's granddaughter and the apple of her grandmother's eye. The small girl had been premature at birth and it had been touch and go for three months, and her mother was unable to have any more children.

'What about her?'

'We thought she'd follow us, Nina, really we did. Bob and Kelly said they'd wait for her but they got fed up and went home. Jason heard her calling; she's stuck on the rocks...' Nina was running now, her stomach turning over with fear. Peter was sobbing quietly as he ran, his small legs manfully keeping stride with hers. A stormy grey dusk was settling swiftly on to the shadowed sands, dark clouds obscuring the moon's faint light and plunging the beach into night.

'Where is she?' Nina reached Jason, who was jumping up and down in his anguish, tears coursing unheeded down his white cheeks.

'Over there.' He pointed into the distance where the children had been playing such a short time before, and Nina's heart sank with despair. The cove was completely submerged in angry foaming water, the waves already splashing halfway up the razor-sharp rocks.

'Are you sure she's there?' Nina began to ask, but then she saw her, a stiff little figure clinging desperately to the rock face in a small cleft in the cliff. The waves were breaking viciously near her thin body and it appeared that any moment she would be swept into the icy water and against the shingle-covered rocks.

'What are we going to do?' Peter whimpered faintly, echoing the question in her own heart. She glanced round frantically but the empty beach was bleak and cold. There was no one to help.

Her racing mind went into automatic and she found herself speaking calmly to the two boys, issuing orders quickly and firmly. 'Jason, you go up to the house and use the telephone. Ring the coastguard, ambulance ... they'll tell you if anyone else needs to know. Go on now.' She gave him a little push and he sped off into the darkness as though he had wings on his feet.

'Peter, you take the short cut to the village. Go straight to Mary's house and tell her parents what's happened. Tell them to bring a rope, blankets, anything else they can think of.' He was running before she'd finished speaking and she called after him into the enveloping blackness, 'Be careful, Peter—mind the cliff path!'

Left alone, she looked back towards the small girl. Even as she had been speaking to the twins the sea had advanced another few feet, washing over her shoes as she stood on the shoreline. Mary would never hang on until help arrived. Fear and the biting cold water would cause those small hands to lose their weak grip and she would plunge into the black water. Even if she could swim, the fury of the sea would dash her against the rocks in seconds. She had to try and reach her; together they might both survive.

The shock as the icy water reached her middle caused her to gasp. She had discarded her shoes and coat at the water's edge, wading into the murky depths without a backward glance. The sea was like a silent enemy, powerful and relentless. She soon had to swim, the crashing waves trying to force her back to the shore, their magnetic pull insidious.

'Please, God, let me reach her...' she prayed out loud into the unfriendly sky, the bitter cold making her legs numb and her limbs heavy. She felt hard contact as the sea drove her slight frame against a submerged rock, but the fierce cold had anaesthetised her body and she was unaware that her legs were torn and bleeding. She was tiring; she wasn't going to make it...

She began to talk in her mind to Steed, telling him all the things she had left unsaid, making him promises she would not now be able to keep. It was as if he were here in the water beside her, encouraging her, forcing her to go on. She remembered his last pleading words, 'I need something...' The salt was stinging her eyes and filling her ears; her clothes were lead weights that were dragging her down. She didn't feel cold now; she didn't feel anything. 'Please, God, don't let me die...'

She was close enough now to see Mary's face. The small girl was blind with fear, her mouth drawn back in a contorted soundless scream, her wet hair plastered to her skull.

Nina had no more strength left to swim, and she was battling just to stay afloat. Time and time again the huge waves threw her close enough to the shining, slippery cliff face for her to feel the cold rock, but each time the relentless pull of the sea dragged her back into the foaming depths. The deep was claiming her for its own, reluctant to give up its prey.

She never knew how she managed to find the foothold. One minute she was totally submerged under the raging black water, the next she was clinging to the cliff surface with both feet wedged into a cleft and her hands scrabbling for a grip on the rough stone. Mary was a few inches above her but the waves were sweeping against her tiny body with enormous strength. It was a miracle that she had held on for this long.

Slowly Nina pulled herself up the cliff face an inch at a time. Twice she nearly fell back into the boiling water beneath her, but finally she was beside Mary, moving protectively against her small body.

It was some moments before the little girl became aware of her presence, and her tenacious grip on the rock surface didn't lessen. She might have been a small barnacle, so tight was her hold. She came

from generations of fisherman stock; fear and respect of the sea was as natural to her as breathing. She knew what would happen if she should weaken for one second.

'Mary?' Nina whispered, worried the child had lapsed into shock. That would be deadly.

The small girl blinked twice, her wet salty face stiff. 'Hello, miss.'

'Everything is going to be all right,' Nina said reassuringly. 'All we've got to do is hang on tight and wait for than to come and find us.' She shifted slightly on the precariously narrow ledge.

'I'm scared.' The small voice was a whisper.

'You're doing wonderfully. Your mum and dad will be proud of you.'

'Me ma'll go mad.' The tiny body swayed as she flexed the small fingers of one blue hand. 'I can't hold on much longer, miss.'

'Do you think you can get up there if I help you?' Nina flicked her head upwards. She had noticed an area of rock where the spray disappeared. There was obviously an opening of some kind and it might be large enough to protect them from the pounding surf. They had to try. The water was still rising.

'I want to stay here.'

Nina looked into the terror-stricken eyes. It was imperative they move and soon. Quietly she began to talk, her low voice steady and confident, explaining the need for their ascent, calmly instilling trust into the trembling child.

Mary was immobile for a moment, staring down into the churning water, and then she nodded carefully. 'If you think we should, then, miss.'

'Good girl.' There was no time to lose. 'I'll go first and then reach down for you. We'll do it bit by bit. When I tell you, reach up one hand and hold on tight with the other one.'

Her body felt strange as she tried to move. She was shaking with cold and yet her legs had no feeling; a dangerous numbness was making her clumsy. Her heart pounded with fear as she strained for a handhold; the misty spray made the cliff treacherously slippery.

They struggled, inch by inch, up the solid wall. Her breath was hot in her throat and her muscles screamed in protest as she hauled the child bodily from one tiny ledge to another. Mary's slight little frame would normally have been as light as a feather, but her thick sodden clothes were weighing her down, making her seem as heavy as lead.

Exhaustion was making Nina's head swim, and as she jerked Mary the last few inches she sobbed with relief, falling backwards into the small wet cave thankfully.

The cave was, in fact, no more than a long narrow indentation in the stark cliff face, going back a mere five feet or so into the solid rock, but to Nina's sore, blurred eyes it was the most beautiful little room in the world.

Without its protection they could only have survived a few more minutes.

'When will they come for us?' Mary's cracked voice was trembling and her large brown eyes brimming with tears.

'Soon, darling, very soon.' Nina forced the panic from her voice. 'The thing now is to try and keep as warm as we can. I know you're wet through, but if we cuddle together as tight as we can it will make us feel better.' Hypothermia was a dark spectre at their side. She pulled

the child into her arms, lying with her back to the opening, where drops of salt water fluttered, cradling Mary tightly against her chest.

They lay quietly for a time, their frozen limbs slowly relaxing. Her whole body ached with cold and sick exhaustion, and now that the blood was beginning to flow through her legs again the pain was excruciating. She became aware that her jeans were in tatters and it felt as though her left foot was broken.

'Tell me about school, Mary—do you like it?' Her teeth were chattering so much that she could hardly get the words out, but she felt they must keep talking; she was terrified they would fall asleep and never wake up.

They spent the next few hours weakly talking and dozing, stretching their cramped limbs every few minutes to keep them awake, although any movement now caused Nina acute agony. At one point icy water flooded round their chilled bodies, causing them to crouch upright in helpless fear, but after a few minutes it didn't happen again. They were clearly right at tide level. Nina breathed a quick prayer of thankfulness.

In the midst of the dark weary night Nina thought she heard voices shouting somewhere near by, but her throat was too sore and cracked to reply and she was sure it was just her imagination anyway. Mary had long since stopped asking about their rescue; she lay in the curve of Nina's body, quietly sleeping, and Nina didn't have the strength to waken her any more.

She felt herself slipping into unconsciousness, her efforts to fight it growing weaker each time. Gradually her swollen eyelids closed and her tormented mind raced menacingly down long water-filled corridors in wild dark dreams.

'They're here—we've found than!' She was vaguely aware of disjointed voices bouncing round her head, but her limbs were too heavy to move and this sweet sleep that had eased the pain from her body was too precious to lose.

She felt a warm hand touch her cheek and her eyelids fluttered slightly; beside her she was aware of Mary stirring in her sleep.

'They're still alive but they're in a bad way. Get those bags lowered down on the harness and tell the men we're bringing than up.' She wished all this shouting would stop; it was breaking into her head and making the pain come back. Why didn't they just leave her alone and let ha sleep?

She felt herself being gently pulled over the cold wet rock and the pain was too intense to ignore any more. A voice was groaning and calling out in agony, but she didn't recognise it as hers.

'What the hell are you doing to her? Give her to me.'

'Look, mate, with all due respect, I'm trained for this sort of thing; let me -'

'I said give her to me.' She recognised that deep authoritative voice.

'Steed?' She tried to speak his name but there was no sound, and she forced her eyelids open. 'Steed?' This time a cracked murmur emerged from her white lips, causing the iron-hard arms that were holding her to stiffen. She could just make out his blurred outline against the dim early-morning light and was aware of his urgent voice talking as she lost consciousness again.

She came round once in the ambulance as it sped through the quiet sleeping streets, its siren screaming, fighting against the heavy material that cocooned her in its folds.

'It's all right, my love, it's all right. We've got to keep you warm. You're going to hospital.' Steed was by her side and the animal panic lessened, her white face relaxing as he stroked her cheek gently, 'You were so cold, my darling.'

'Mary?' He bent low to hear the whisper and she could see his face clearly, the dark unshaven skin and ruffled hair.

'She's fine.' His voice cracked. 'No bones broken; just shock and exhaustion, as far as they know.'

'I hurt.' He made a sound deep in his throat, a muscle tightening in his dark cheek. 'You need a shave...' She drifted off again into that welcoming abyss.

'Good morning.' The bright, cheerful voice and opening door registered in Nina's brain at the same time. She opened bleary, sore eyes slowly. 'It's a beautiful day and you've been asleep for nearly twenty-four hours. We're calling you the Sleeping Beauty.'

The young nurse was fresh-faced and glowing with energy. 'Come on, pet, let's have you sitting up, and then you can drink a nice cup of tea.' She helped Nina to rise in the smooth white hospital bed, plumping up the hard pillows vigorously as she spoke.

'Thank you.' Nina's voice was faint; all this boundless efficiency first thing in the morning was a little hard to take.

'Frightened everyone to death, you did,' said the nurse happily as she passed Nina the steaming cup of tea with two biscuits in the saucer. 'Still, as I always say, all's well that ends well.'

Realisation came bursting in as Nina glanced round the small pale green room, bright sunlight lighting up the tiled floor and turning the yellow daffodils on her bedside locker into shining gold.

'How's Mary?' she asked quietly, taking a small sip of the scalding-hot tea.

'The little girl who came in with you? Oh, she's fine— you know what children are. Down one minute and up the next; they're more resilient than us. She only stayed in for the day to be checked over. The doctor let her go home last night, more to put her poor mother's mind at rest, I think.'

'How long have I been in here?' Nina asked, grimacing as she shifted her aching legs slightly on the hard mattress.

'You were admitted early yesterday morning,' the nurse replied blandly, straightening the already immaculate bed. 'Caused quite a stir—it was all stations go for a while.'

The door opened again and a middle-aged sister beckoned urgently to the nurse. 'Bedpans on ward six, please, Nurse, and you'll have to help Mr Larkin down to the toilet. He flatly refuses to use a bedpan. And check Mr Swinton's dressing.' The nurse disappeared immediately in a flurry of activity, her big black shoes squeaking on the white tiles.

'Sister!' Nina called to the woman as she was closing the door again. 'Can I have a word, please?'

'Certainly.' The sister's smile was warm.

'What exactly is wrong with me?'

'The doctor will be round soon and he will explain,' the sister said politely, her expression softening as she saw Nina's troubled face.

'Nothing to worry about,' she confided softly. 'You were suffering from shock and cold, and lacerations to your legs and arms. I'm afraid your left ankle is broken, but you're healing nicely and there are no other complications. A few weeks and you'll be as good as new, my dear.'

The elderly doctor later confirmed the sister's words. 'You'll need plenty of rest for a day or two, but you're young and healthy and there's no need to treat yourself like an invalid.' His voice was clinically cool; she was clearly just another number to him. 'I see no reason why you can't go home later today. I understand your fiance has made arrangements for you to be cared for.'

'Has he?' Nina asked eagerly, her face lighting up. The sister had told her Steed had had to be almost forcibly removed from her room late last night, where he had kept a vigil by the side of her bed until the staff had persuaded him to go home and take some rest.

'I must say you have been a lot less trouble than him,' the doctor added wryly, his thin, austere face breaking into a small smile as he saw the surprise on Nina's face. 'One would have thought you were the only patient in the hospital.'

'I'm sorry,' Nina said contritely, but the doctor gave a dry chuckle.

'Don't be. Reminds me of when I first met my wife. She died three years ago, but we had thirty happy years together and I wouldn't have missed a day. Oh, and by the way,' he patted her gently on the hand, 'that little girl owes her life to you. That was a very brave thing you did, young lady; very brave.' He patted her hand again and left the room, leaving Nina in a warm daze, her eyes full of tears. She had misjudged him; he wasn't such a dry old stick after all; just lonely. She sank back against the pillows and closed her eyes.

She heard Steed coming long before he reached her room. He was obviously arguing with someone in authority, his deep voice reaching her ears as he neared the door. 'I'd left strict instructions for you to call me the minute she was awake.'

'But there was no need, Mr Charlton.' The doctor's voice was painfully patient. 'You had told me you were calling back here first thing, several times,', the voice was mildly sarcastic, 'and she has only been awake a couple of hours.'

'A couple of hours!' The door was nearly swung off its hinges as Steed strode into the room, coming to an abrupt halt as he saw Nina sitting up in bed. The doctor who had spoken to her earlier cannoned into his broad back and an entourage of nurses and junior doctors came to a standstill in the corridor, their expressions ranging from outrage to delighted amusement.

'See what I mean?' the doctor mouthed silently as he backed quietly out of the room, closing the door gently behind him.

Steed stood rooted to the spot, the expression in his eyes causing hot colour to flood her pale cheeks. 'My precious love,' he muttered thickly, 'my beautiful, precious love.' He was by her side in an instant, almost lifting her out of the bed in his passion. His mouth was on hers, desperate hungry kisses covering her face until she could hardly breathe and her head began to swim.

'I'm never going to let you out of my sight again,' he said softly, his grey eyes dark with pain. 'I want you by my side every minute of every day.'

She looked up at him, her love glowing like stars in her eyes. 'Oh, Steed, I realised there was so much I wanted to say to you and I didn't think I was going to get the chance.'

'Don't.' His mouth straightened in anguish. 'I can't bear to think of it. I nearly went mad when I got home and there was no one there. I saw lights on the beach and went down...' He stopped and ran his hand through his hair. 'I think they must have thought I was crazy. The whole village seemed to be there and the police and ambulance arrived just as I did. When I found out it was you who was missing I think I really must have lost my mind for a while.'

He looked at her ruefully. 'It took three of them to hold me when I tried to go in the water. I'm afraid I was a little rough on them.'

'Oh, Steed,' she said weakly, her eyes soft.

'When it was decided by the sea-rescue that we had to wait until first light I'm afraid I totally disgraced myself. I doubt whether there's one person in the village left who doesn't think you must be mad to marry me.'

He stopped suddenly. 'You are marrying me, aren't you?' There was a trace of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

She opened her arms in reply, drawing him down beside her on the narrow high bed. They clung together tightly, their warm breath mingling as they drank their fill of each other's faces. 'You would have killed me too, you know,' Steed said softly as he stroked the soft golden hair from her flushed face. 'If you had been lost I wouldn't have wanted to go on. I love you more than life itself, Nina; I always have.'

He took her face in his hands as he looked deep into the dark violet eyes. 'Say it, Nina. Tell me I wasn't wrong yesterday when I went up to the studio and saw your work. Tell me what those pictures told me.'

'I love you,' she said simply, her heart in her eyes.

'I've dreamed for years of hearing you say that. I've waited so long for you that I'd almost given up.' His face was both tender and wistful with a deep throb of possessive victory in his voice that thrilled her heart. He kissed to again, long and deeply, drawing away to run a shaky hand through his hair. 'My ego's taken a bit of a hammering, I can tell you.'

She smiled at the mocking reproach in his voice. 'Well, from what I've heard, it was about time.'

He looked at her through narrowed eyes. 'James?' She nodded slowly as his face straightened. 'I could whip that young man for all the trouble he causes.' There was a trace of the furious anger he had displayed at the villa. 'One thing I promise you, Nina: from the first day I saw you there has been no one else in my life who matters that much.' He snapped his fingers sharply. 'It's to my eternal discredit that I first had the idea regarding the twins because it seemed a feasible proposition to put to you when your father died. I was worried if I just arrived on your doorstep offering to buy the house for you and settle the debts you would think I had an ulterior motive.'

'Well, didn't you?' she teased gently.

He grinned wickedly. 'You can bet your sweet life I did. I've never been as nervous in my life as I was that day.'

She remembered vividly her fear of the cold hard stranger he had seemed that evening so many weeks ago. 'You didn't appear nervous.'

He drew her to him again, turning her gently against him so she was pressed slightly backwards, looking up into his hot dark eyes. 'You've got a lot to learn about me, woman, and I'm sure going to enjoy teaching you. I've practised so much restraint over the last few weeks that I think I'm going to eat you alive. You can't imagine how much

I've wanted you, how many times I nearly took you, regardless of how you felt about me.'

'I knew you wanted to make love to me,' she said, flushing as his eyes devoured her mouth. 'But I thought it was just a physical thing, that you loved someone else.'

'Someone else?' His voice was incredulous. 'Who on earth...?'

'I hadn't decided that,' she replied demurely.

He laughed softly, his face wryly amused. 'For such an innocent little thing, you can be as hard as iron when you want to be, can't you? Didn't you know you were putting me through hell on earth?'

'But you were always so angry, so overpowering...'

He grinned sardonically. 'I'd have preferred "charismatic" or "irresistible", but I can live with "overpowering".' She leant against his hard body, soaking up the male smell of him.

'I think I knew even at sixteen you were the one man I could love for the rest of my life.'

His mouth twisted cynically. 'Well, you sure fooled me. To have the goods displayed so temptingly and be unable to touch...'

She punched him lightly in the chest. 'You did a certain amount of touching, if I remember rightly.'

He grimaced mockingly. 'I never was very good at resisting temptation. I was always the one caught with my hand in the candy jar. However, I think you'll realise once we're married just how much restraint I've had to exercise...' His eyes glowed with desire. 'How I shall survive the next three weeks I can't imagine. You'll have to lock your bedroom door each night or put the twins on guard duty.'

She looked down at the stiff cotton bedspread, her fair hair falling round her face. 'You don't have to wait,' she whispered slowly. 'I want to belong to you and -'

He interrupted her, lifting her chin and looking into her shy eyes. 'I'll wait.' His voice was grimly determined. 'Nothing is going to spoil that day for us. It might be old-fashioned, but when you walk down the aisle and make those vows you become my wife in the eyes of the world. I'm going to make that night a night you'll remember all your life. Get plenty of sleep before the big day -' his eyes glittered teasingly '—you're going to need it—you won't get much thereafter.'

'Steed?' She panicked suddenly. 'My ankle. What if I can't walk by then? We'll have to postpone it.'

'Oh, no, we won't,' he said thickly. 'I'll carry you if need be. My patience only runs so far.' He smiled at her, his eyes burning. 'I still can't believe this is for real; I need to know you're mine.' His voice was a low groan as he pulled her tightly against him, his hands moving over her body in a slow caress while she drowned in the heat of his kiss. She shivered when she felt his touch on her breasts, their points hardening in answer to his gentle fingers as a wild excitement had her pressing still closer to his body, the breath shuddering in his throat.

'I want to set you on fire, make you gasp my name again and again as you ask for more...' He slid his hands down to the curve of her thighs, pulling her into his hardness, his voice harsh with longing.

'I love you...' Her own voice was soft with desire, an exquisite yearning to belong to him completely leaving her trembling and unresisting in his arms.

It was Steed who pulled away at last, running a shaking hand over his face as he pulled her close with his other arm. 'I'm sorry,' he said gruffly, 'I don't want to frighten you.'

'You don't.' Her voice was shy.

'Well, you sure scare the hell out of me,' he said with grim humour. 'Maybe it's me who's going to need the guards on the door until D-Day.' She laughed tremulously, her body still hungry for his touch.

'We've got all the time in the world.' He looked at her lovingly. 'As long as I have you, nothing else matters. Nothing will part us again; I'll never let you go. You are mine now and forever.' As his voice rang out in ecstatic triumph he drew her against him, lifting her chin and claiming her lips in possessive mastery.

The old doctor opened the door and smiled gently, shutting it again quietly and hanging the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the handle with a soft sigh. 'Love calms the savage breast,' he muttered to himself as he walked down the silent corridor, his watery eyes seeing back down the years, with a lightness to his step that had been missing for many a long day.